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VOL. III, No. 1

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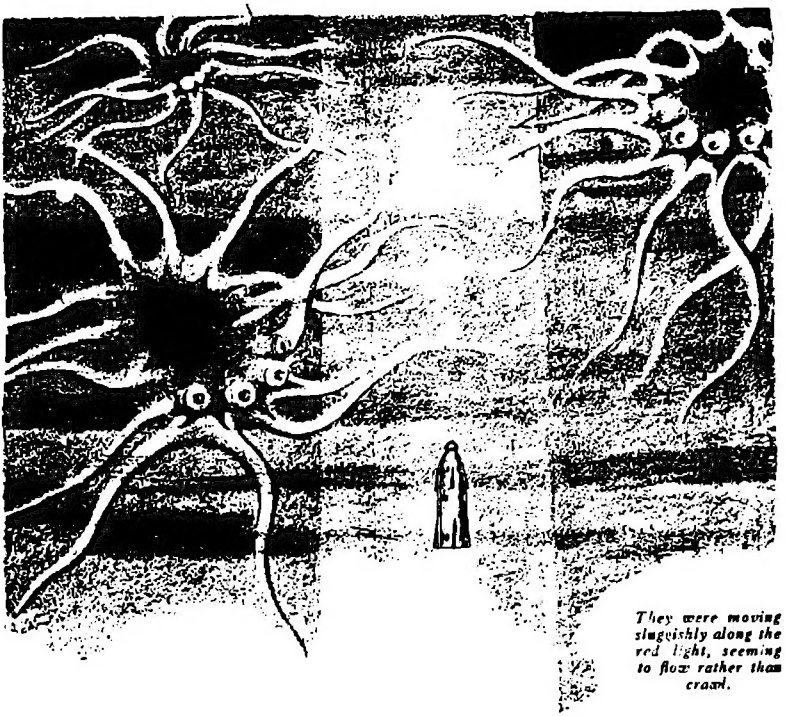

They were moving sluggishly along the red light, seeming to flow rather than crawl.

Beyond the Heaviside Layer

By Capt. S. P. Meek

McQUARRIE, the City Editor, looked up as I entered his office.

"Bond," he asked, "do you know Jim Carpenter?"

"I know him slightly," I replied cautiously. "I have met him several times and I interviewed him some years ago when he improved the Hadley rocket motor. I can't claim a very extensive acquaintance with him."

For eighty vertical miles Carpenter and Bond blasted their way—only to be trapped by the extraordinary monsters of the heaviside layer.

"I thought you knew him well. It is a surprise to me to find that there is any prominent man who is not an especial friend of yours. At any rate you know him as well as anyone of the staff, so I'll give you the assignment."

"What's he up to now?" I asked.

"He's going to try to punch a hole in the heaviside layer."

"But that's impossible," I cried. "How can anyone. . . ."

My voice died away in silence. True enough, the idea of trying to make a permanent hole in a field of magnetic force was absurd, but even as I spoke I remem-

bered that Jim Carpenter had never agreed to the opinion almost unanimously held by our scientists as to the true nature of the heaviside layer.

"It may be impossible," replied McQuarrie dryly, "but you are not hired by this paper as a scientific consultant. For some reason, God alone knows why, the owner thinks that you are a reporter. Get down there and try to prove he is right by digging up a few facts about Carpenter's attempt. Wire your stuff in and Peavey will write it up. On this one occasion, please try to conceal your erudition and send in your story in simple words of one syllable which uneducated men like Peavey and me can comprehend. That's all."

HE turned again to his desk and I left the room. At one time I would have come from such an interview with my face burning, but McQuarrie's vitriol slid off me like water off a duck's back. He didn't really mean half of what he said, and he knew as well as I did that his crack about my holding my job with the Clarion as a matter of pull was grossly unjust. It is true that I knew Trimble, the owner of the Clarion, fairly well, but I got my job without any aid from him. McQuarrie himself hired me and I held my job because he hadn't fired me, despite the caustic remarks which he addressed to me. I had made the mistake when I first got on the paper of letting McQuarrie know that I was a graduate electrical engineer from Leland University, and he had held it against me from that day on. I don't know whether he really held it seriously against me or not, but what I have written above is a fair sample of his usual manner toward me.

In point of fact I had greatly minimized the extent of my acquaintance with Jim Carpenter. I had been in Leland at the same time that he was and had known him quite well. When I graduated, which was two years after he did, I worked for about a year in his laboratory, and my knowledge of the improvement which had made the Hadley rocket motor a practicability came from first hand knowledge and not from an interview. That was several years before but I knew that he never forgot an acquaintance, let alone a friend, and while I had left him to take up other work our parting had been pleasant, and I looked forward with real pleasure to seeing him again.

JIM CARPENTER, the stormy petrel of modern science! The eternal iconoclast; the perpetual opponent! He was probably as deeply versed in the theory of electricity and physical chemistry as any man alive, but it pleased him to pose as a "practical" man who knew next to nothing of theory and who despised the little he did know. His great delight was to experimentally smash the most beautifully constructed theories which were advanced and taught in the colleges and universities of the world, and when he couldn't smash them by experimental evidence, to attack them from the standpoint of philosophical reasoning and to twist around the data on which they were built and make it prove, or seem to prove, the exact opposite of what was generally accepted.

No one questioned his ability. When the ill-fated Hadley had first constructed the rocket motor which bears his name it was Jim Carpenter who made it practical. Hadley had tried to disintegrate lead in order to get his back thrust from the atomic energy which it contained and proved by apparently unimpeachable mathematics that lead was the only substance which could be used. Jim Carpenter had snorted through the pages of the electrical journals and had turned out a modification of Hadley's invention which disintegrated aluminum. The main difference in performance was that, while Hadley's original motor would not develop enough power to lift itself from the ground, Carpenter's modification produced twenty times the horsepower per pound of weight

of any previously known generator of power and changed the rocket ship from a wild dream to an everyday commonplace.

WHEN Hadley later constructed his space flyer and proposed to visit the moon, it was Jim Carpenter who ridiculed the idea of the attempt being successful. He proposed the novel and weird idea that the path to space was not open, but that the earth and the atmosphere were enclosed in a hollow sphere of impenetrable substance through which Hadley's space flyer could not pass. How accurate were his prognostications was soon known to everyone. Hadley built and equipped his flyer and started off on what he hoped would be an epoch making flight. It was one, but not in the way which he had hoped. His ship took off readily enough, being powered with four rocket motors working on Carpenter's principle, and rose to a height of about fifty miles, gaining velocity rapidly. At that point his velocity suddenly began to drop.

He was in constant radio communication with the earth and he reported his difficulty. Carpenter advised him to turn back while he could, but Hadley kept on. Slower and slower became his progress, and after he had penetrated ten miles into the substance which hindered him, his ship stuck fast. Instead of using his bow motors and trying to back out, he had moved them to the rear, and with the combined force of his four motors he had penetrated for another two miles. There he insanely tried to force his motors to drive him on until his fuel was exhausted.

He had lived for over a year in his space flyer, but all of his efforts did not serve to materially change his position. He had tried, of course, to go out through his air locks and explore space, but his strength, even although aided by powerful levers, could not open the outer doors of the locks against the force which was holding them shut. Careful observations were continuously made of the position of his flyer and it was found that it was gradually returning toward the earth. Its motion was very slight, not enough to give any hope for the occupant. Starting from a motion so slow that it could hardly be detected, the velocity of return gradually accelerated; and three years after Hadley's death, the flyer was suddenly released from the force which held it, and it plunged to the earth, to be reduced by the force of its fall to a twisted, pitiful mass of unrecognizable junk.

THE remains were examined, and the iron steel parts were found to be highly magnetized. This fact was seized upon by the scientists of the world and a theory was built up of a magnetic field of force surrounding the earth through which nothing of a magnetic nature could pass. This theory received almost universal acceptance, Jim Carpenter alone of the more prominent men of learning refusing to admit the validity of it. He gravely stated it as his belief that no magnetic field existed, but that the heaviside layer was composed of some liquid of high viscosity whose density and consequent resistance to the passage of a body through it increased in the ratio of the square of the distance to which one penetrated into it.

There was a moment of stunned surprise when he announced his radical idea, and then a burst of Jovian laughter shook the scientific press. Carpenter was in his glory. For months he waged a bitter controversy in the scientific journals and when he failed to win converts by this method, he announced that he would prove it by blasting a way into space through the heaviside layer, a thing which would be patently impossible were it a field of force. He had lapsed into silence for two years and his curt note to the Associated Press to the effect that he was now ready to demonstrate his experiment was the first intimation the world had received of his progress.

I DREW expense money from the cashier and boarded the Lark for Los Angeles. When I arrived I went to a hotel and at once called Carpenter on the telephone.

"Jim Carpenter speaking," came his voice presently.

"Good evening, Mr. Carpenter," I replied, "this is Bond of the San Francisco Clarion."

I would be ashamed to repeat the language which came over that telephone. I was informed that all reporters were pests and that I was a doubly obnoxious specimen and that were I within reach I would be promptly assaulted and that reporters would be received at nine the next morning and no earlier or later.

"Just a minute, Mr. Carpenter," I cried as he neared the end of his peroration and was, I fancied, about to slam up the receiver. "Don't you remember me? I was at Leland with you and used to work in your laboratory in the atomic disintegration section."

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Bond, Mr. Carpenter."

"Oh, First Mortgage! Certainly I remember you. Mighty glad to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Carpenter. I would not have ventured to call you had I not known you. I didn't mean to impose and I'll be glad to see you in the morning at nine."

"Not by a long shot," he cried. "You'll come up right away. Where are you staying?"

"At the El Rey."

"Well, check out and come right up here. There's lots of room for you here at the plant and I'll be glad to have you. I want at least one intelligent report of this experiment and you should be able to write it. I'll look for you in an hour."

"I don't want to impose—" I began; but he interrupted.

"Nonsense, glad to have you. I needed someone like you badly and you have come just in the nick of time. I'll expect you in an hour."

THE receiver clicked and I hastened to follow his instructions. A ringside seat was just what I was looking for. It took my taxi a little over an hour to get to the Carpenter laboratory and I chuckled when I thought of how McQuarrie's face would look when he saw my expense account. Presently we reached the edge of the grounds which surrounded the Carpenter laboratory and were stopped at the high gate I remembered so well.

"Are you sure you'll get in, buddy?" asked my driver.

"Certainly," I replied. "What made you ask?"

"I've brought three chaps out here to-day and none of them got in," he answered with a grin. "I'm glad you're so sure, but I'll just wait around until you are inside before I drive away."

I laughed and advanced to the gate. Tim, the old guard, was still there, and he remembered and welcomed me.

"Me ordhers wuz t' let yez roight in, sor," he said as he greeted me. "Jist lave ye'er bag here and Oi'll have ut sint roight up."

I dropped my bag and trudged up the well remembered path to the laboratory. It had been enlarged somewhat since I saw it last and, late though the hour was, there was a bustle in the air and I could see a number of men working in the building. From an area in the rear, which was lighted by huge flood lights, came the staccato tattoo of a riveter. I walked up to the front of the laboratory and entered. I knew the way to Carpenter's office and I went directly there and knocked.

"Hello, First Mortgage!" cried Jim Carpenter as I entered in response to his call. "I'm glad to see you. Excuse the bruskness of my first greeting to you over the telephone, but the press have been deviling me all day, every man jack of them trying to steal a march on the rest. I am going to open the whole shebang at nine to-morrow and give them all an equal chance to look things over before I turn the current on at noon. As soon as we have a

little chat, I'll show you over the works."

AFTER half an hour's chat he rose. "Come along, First Mortgage," he said, "we'll go out and look the place over and I'll explain everything. If my ideas work out, you'll have no chance to go over it to-morrow, so I want you to see it now."

I had no chance to ask him what he meant by this remark, for he walked rapidly from the laboratory and I perforce followed him. He led the way to the patch of lighted ground behind the building where the riveting machine was still beating out its monotonous cacaphony and paused by the first of a series of huge reflectors, which were arranged in a circle.

"Here is the start of the thing," he said. "There are two hundred and fifty of these reflectors arranged in a circle four hundred yards in diameter. Each of them is an opened parabola of such spread that their beams will cover an area ten yards in diameter at fifty miles above the earth. If my calculations are correct they should penetrate through the layer at an average speed of fifteen miles per hour per unit, and by two o'clock to-morrow afternoon, the road to space should be open."

"What is your power?" I asked.

"Nothing but a concentration of infra-red rays. The heaviside layer, as you doubtless know, is a liquid and, I think, an organic liquid. If I am right in that thought, the infra-red will cut through it like a knife through cheese."

"If it is a liquid, how will you prevent it from flowing back into the hole you have opened?" I asked.

"When the current is first turned on, each reflector will bear on the same point. Notice that they are moveable. They are arranged so that they move together. As soon as the first hole is bored through, they will move by clockwork, extending the opening until each points vertically upward and the hole is four hundred yards in diameter. I am positive that there will be no rapid flow even after the current is turned off, for I believe that the liquid is about as mobile as petroleum jelly. Should it close, however, it would take only a couple of hours to open it again to allow the space flyer to return."

"What space flyer?" I demanded quickly.

"The one we are going to be on, First Mortgage," he replied with a slight chuckle.

"WE?" I cried, aghast.

"Certainly. We. You and I. You didn't think I was going to send you alone, did you?"

"I didn't know that anyone was going."

"Of course. Someone has to go; otherwise, how could I prove my point? I might cut through a hundred holes and yet these stiff-necked old fossils, seeing nothing, would not believe. No, First Mortgage, when those arcs start working to-morrow, you and I will be in a Hadley space ship up at the bottom of the layer, and as soon as the road has been opened, two of the lamps will cut off to allow us through. Then the battery will hold the road open while we pass out into space and return."

"Suppose we meet with Hadley's fate?" I demanded.

"We won't. Even if I am wrong—which is very unlikely—we won't meet with any such fate. We have two stern motors and four bow motors. As soon as we meet with the slightest resistance to our forward progress we will stop and have twice the power plus gravity to send us earthwards. There is no danger connected with the trip."

"All the same—" I began.

"All the same, you're going," he replied. "Man alive, think of the chance to make a world scoop for your paper! No other press man has the slightest inkling of my plan and even if they had, there isn't another space flyer in the world that I know of. If you don't want to go, I'll give some one else the chance, but I prefer you, for you know something of my work."

I THOUGHT rapidly for a moment. The chance was a unique one and one that half the press men in San Francisco would have given their shirts to get. I had had my doubts of the accuracy of Jim Carpenter's reasoning while I was away from him, but there was no resisting the dynamic personality of the man when in his presence.

"You win," I said with a laugh. "Your threat of offering some of my hated rivals a chance settled it."

"Good boy!" he exclaimed, pounding me on the back. "I knew you'd come. I had intended to take one of my assistants with me, but as soon as I knew you were here I decided that you were the man. There really ought to be a press representative along. Come with me and I'll show you our flyer."

The flyer proved to be of the same general type as had been used by Hadley. It was equipped with six rocket motors, four discharging to the bow and two to the stern. Any one of them, Carpenter said, was ample for motive power. Equilibrium was maintained by means of a heavy gyroscope which would prevent any turning of the axis of its rotation. The entire flyer shell could be revolved about the axis so that oblique motion with our bow and stern motors was readily possible. Direct lateral movement was provided for by valves which would divert a portion of the discharge of either a bow or stern motor out through side vents in any direction. The motive power, of course, was furnished by the atomic disintegration of powdered aluminum. The whole interior, except for the portion of the walls, roof and floor, which was taken up by vitriolene windows, was heavily padded.

AT nine the next morning the gates to the enclosure were thrown open and the representatives of the press admitted. Jim Carpenter mounted a platform and explained briefly what he proposed to do and then broke the crowd up into small groups and sent them over the works with guides. When all had been taken around they were reassembled and Carpenter announced to them his intention of going up in a space flyer and prove, by going through the heaviside layer, that he had actually destroyed a portion of it. There was an immediate clamor of applications to go with him. He laughingly announced that one reporter was all that he could stand on the ship and that he was taking one of his former associates with him. I could tell by the envious looks with which I was favored that any popularity I had ever had among my associates was gone forever. There was little time to think of such things, however, for the hour for our departure was approaching, and the photographers were clamoring for pictures of us and the flyer.

We satisfied them at last, and I entered the flyer after Carpenter. We sealed the car up, started the air conditioner, and were ready for departure.

"Scared, Pete?" asked Carpenter, his hand on the starting lever.

I gulped a little as I looked at him. He was perfectly calm to a casual inspection, but I knew him well enough to interpret the small spots of red which appeared on his high cheek bones and the glitter in his eye. He may not have been as frightened as I was but he was laboring under an enormous nervous strain. The mere fact that he called me "Pete" instead of his usual "First Mortgage" showed that he was feeling pretty serious.

"Not exactly scared," I replied, "but rather uneasy, so to speak."

HE laughed nervously.

"Cheer up, old man! If anything goes wrong, we won't know it. Sit down and get comfortable; this thing will start with a jerk."

He pulled the starting lever forward suddenly and I felt as though an intolerable weight were pressed against me, glueing me to my seat. The feeling lasted only for a moment, for he quickly eased up on the motor, and in a few moments I felt quite normal.

"How fast are we going?" I asked.

"Only two hundred miles an hour," he replied. "We will reach the layer on plenty of time at this rate and I don't want to jam into it. You can get up now."

I rose, moved over to the observation glass in the floor, and looked down. We were already five or ten miles above the earth and were ascending rapidly. I could still detect the great circle of reflectors with which our way was to be opened.

"How can you tell where these heat beams are when they are turned on?" I asked. "Infra-red rays are not visible, and we will soon be out of sight of the reflectors."

"I forgot to mention that I am having a small portion of visible red rays mixed with the infra-red so that we can spot them. I have a radio telephone here working on my private wavelength, so that I can direct operations from here as well as from the ground —in fact, better. If you're cold, turn on the heater."

THE friction of the flyer against the air had so far made up for the decreasing temperature of the air surrounding us, but a glance at the outside thermometer warned me that his suggestion was a wise one. I turned a valve which diverted a small portion of our exhaust through a heating coil in the flyer. It was hard to realize that I was actually in a rocket space ship, the second one to be flown and that, with the exception of the ill-fated Hadley, farther from the earth than any man had been before. There was no sensation of movement in that hermatically sealed flyer, and, after the first few moments, the steady drone of the rocket motor failed to register on my senses. I was surprised to see that there was no trail of detritus behind us.

"You can see our trail at night," replied Carpenter when I asked him about it, "but in daylight, there is nothing to see. The slight luminosity of the gasses is hidden by the sun's rays. We may be able to see it when we get out in space beyond the layer, but I don't know. We have arrived at the bottom of the layer now, I believe. At any rate, we are losing velocity."

I MOVED over to the instrument board and looked. Our speed had dropped to one hundred and ten miles an hour and was steadily falling off. Carpenter pulled the control lever and reduced our power. Gradually the flyer came to a stop and hung poised in space. He shut off the power an instant and at once our indicator showed that we were falling, although very slowly. He promptly reapplied the power, and by careful adjustment brought us again to a dead stop.

"Ready to go," he remarked looking at his watch, "and just on time, too. Take a glass and watch the ground. I am going to have the heat turned on."

I took the binoculars he indicated and turned them toward the ground while he gave a few crisp orders into his telephone. Presently from the ground beneath us burst out a circle of red dots from which long beams stabbed up into the heavens. The beams converged as they mounted until at a point slightly below us, and a half-mile away they became one solid beam of red. One peculiarity I noticed was that, while they were plainly visible near the ground, they faded out, and it was not until they were a few miles below us that they again became apparent. I followed their path upward into the heavens.

"Look here, Jim!" I cried as I did so. "Something's happening!"

He sprang to my side and glanced at the beam.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, pounding me on the back. "I was right! Look! And the fools called it a magnetic field!"

Upward the beam was boring its way, but it was almost concealed by a rain of fine particles of black which were falling around it.

"It's ever more spectacular than I had hoped," he chortled. "I had expected to

reduce the layer to such fluidity that we could penetrate it or even to vaporize it, but we are actually destroying it! That stuff is soot and is proof, if proof be needed, that the layer is an organic liquid."

HE turned to his telephone and communicated the momentous news to the earth and then rejoined me at the window. For ten minutes we watched and a slight diminution of the black cloud became apparent.

"They're through the layer," exclaimed Carpenter. "Now watch, and you'll see something. I'm going to start spreading the beam."

He turned again to his telephone, and presently the beam began to widen and spread out. As it did so the dark cloud became more dense than it had been before. The earth below us was hidden and we could see the red only as a dim murky glow through the falling soot. Carpenter inquired of the laboratory and found that we were completely invisible to the ground, half the heavens being hidden by the black pall. For an hour the beam worked its way toward us.

"The hole is about four hundred yards in diameter right now," said Carpenter as he turned from the telephone. "I have told them to stop the movement of the reflectors, and as soon as the air clears a little, we'll start through."

It took another hour for the soot to clear enough that we could plainly detect the ring of red light before us. Carpenter gave some orders to the ground, and a gap thirty yards wide opened in the wall before us. Toward this gap the flyer moved slowly under the side thrust of the diverted motor discharge. The temperature rose rapidly as we neared the wall of red light before us. Nearer we drew until the light was on both sides of us. Another few feet and the flyer shot forward with a jerk that threw me sprawling on the floor. Carpenter fell too, but he maintained his hold on the controls and tore at them desperately to check us.

I SCRAMBLED to my feet and watched. The red wall was alarmingly close. Nearer we drove and then came another jerk which threw me sprawling again. The wall retreated. In another moment we were standing still, with the red all around us at a distance of about two hundred yards.

"We had a narrow escape from being cremated," said Carpenter with a shaky laugh. "I knew that our speed would increase as soon as we got clear of the layer but it caught me by surprise just the same. I had no idea how great the holding effect of the stuff was. Well, First Mortgage, the road to space is open for us. May I invite you to be my guest on a little week-end jaunt to the Moon?"

"No thanks, Jim," I said with a wry smile. "I think a little trip to the edge of the layer will quite satisfy me."

"Quitter," he laughed. "Well, say good-by to familiar things. Here we go!"

He turned to the controls of the flyer, and presently we were moving again, this time directly away from the earth. There was no jerk at starting this time, merely a feeling as though the floor were pressing against my feet, a great deal like the feeling a person gets when they rise rapidly in an express elevator. The indicator showed that we were traveling only sixty miles an hour. For half an hour we continued monotonously on our way with nothing to divert us. Carpenter yawned.

"Now that it's all over, I feel let down and sleepy," he announced. "We are well beyond the point to which Hadley penetrated and so far we have met with no resistance. We are probably nearly at the outer edge of the layer. I think I'll shoot up a few miles more and then call it a day and go home. We are about eighty miles from the earth now."

I LOOKED down, but could see nothing below us, but the dense cloud of black soot resulting from the destruction of the heaviside layer. Like

Carpenter, I felt sleepy, and I suppressed a yawn as I turned again to the window.

"Look here, Jim!" I cried suddenly. "What's that?"

He moved in a leisurely manner to my side and looked out. As he did so I felt his hand tighten on my shoulder with a desperate grip. Down the wall of red which surrounded us was coming an object of some kind. The thing was fully seventy-five yards long and half as wide at its main portion, while long irregular streams extended for a hundred yards on each side of it. There seemed to be dozens of them.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked in a voice which sounded high and unnatural to me.

"I don't know," he muttered, half to me and half to himself. "Good Lord, there's another of them!"

He pointed. Not far from the first of the things came another, even larger than the first. They were moving sluggishly along the red light, seeming to flow rather than to crawl. I had a horrible feeling that they were alive and malignant. Carpenter stepped back to the controls of the flyer and stopped our movement; we hung in space, watching them. The things were almost level with us, but their sluggish movement was downward toward the earth. In color, they were a brilliant crimson, deepening into purple near the center. Just as the first of them came opposite us it paused, and slowly a portion of the mass extended itself from the main bulk; and then, like doors opening, four huge eyes, each of them twenty feet in diameter, opened and stared at us.

"It's alive, Jim," I quavered. I hardly knew my own voice as I spoke.

JIM stepped back to the controls with a white face, and slowly we moved closer to the mass. As we approached I thought that I could detect a fleeting passage of expression in those huge eyes. Then they disappeared and only a huge crimson and purple blob lay before us. Jim moved the controls again and the flyer came to a stop.

Two long streamers moved out from the mass. Suddenly there was a jerk to the ship which threw us both to the floor. It started upward at express train speed. Jim staggered to his feet, grasped the controls and started all four bow motors at full capacity, but even this enormous force had not the slightest effect in diminishing our speed.

"Well, the thing's got us, whatever it is," said Jim as he pulled his controls to neutral, shutting off all power. Now that the danger had assumed a tangible form, he appeared as cool and collected as ever, to my surprise, I found that I had recovered control of my muscle and of my voice. I became aware that the shoulder which Jim had gripped was aching badly, and I rubbed it absently.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked for the third time.

"I don't know," he replied. "It is some horrible inhabitant of space, something unknown to us on earth. From its appearance and actions, I think it must be a huge single-celled animal of the type of the earthly amoeba. If an amoeba is that large here, what must an elephant look like? However, I expect that we'll learn more about the matter later because it's taking us with it, wherever it's going."

SUDDENLY the flyer became dark inside. I looked at the nearest window, but I could not even detect its outline. I reached for the light switch, but a sudden change in direction threw me against the wall. There was an instant of intense heat in the flyer.

"We have passed the heaviside layer," said Jim. "The brute has changed direction, and we felt that heat when he took us through the infra-red wall."

I reached again for the light switch, but before I could find it our motion ceased and an instant later the flyer was filled with glaring sunlight. We both turned to the window.

We lay on a glistening plain of bluish hue which stretched without a break as far as we could see. Not a thing broke the monotony of our vision. We turned to the opposite window. How can I describe the sight which met our horrified gaze? On the plain before us lay a huge purple monstrosity of gargantuan dimensions. The thing was a shapeless mass, only the four huge eyes standing out regarding us balefully. The mass was continually changing its outline and, as we watched, a long streamer extended itself from the body toward us. Over and around the flyer the feeler went, while green and red colors played over first one and then another of the huge eyes before us. The feeler wrapped itself around the flyer and we were lifted into the air toward those horrible eyes. We had almost reached them when the thing dropped us. We fell to the plain with a crash. We staggered to our feet again and looked out. Our captor was battling for its life.

ITS attacker was a smaller thing of a brilliant green hue, striped and mottled with blue and yellow. While our captor was almost formless, the newcomer had a very definite shape. It resembled a cross between a bird and a lizard, its shape resembling a bird, as did tiny rudimentary wings and a long beak, while the scaly covering and the fact that it had four legs instead of two bore out the idea that it might be a lizard. Its huge birdlike beak was armed with three rows of long sharp teeth with which it was tearing at our captor. The purple amoeba was holding its assailant with a dozen of its thrown out feelers which were wrapped about the body and legs of the green horror. The whole battle was conducted in absolute silence.

"Now's our chance, Jim!" I cried. "Get away from here while that dragon has the amoeba busy!"

He jumped to the control levers of the flyer and pulled the starting switch well forward. The shock of the sudden start hurled me to the floor, but from where I fell I was able to watch the battle on the plain below us. It raged with uninterrupted fury and I felt certain of our escape when, with a shock which hurled both Jim and me to the ceiling, the flyer stopped. We fell back to the floor and I reflected that it was well for us that the interior of the flyer was so well padded. Had it not been, our bones would have been broken a dozen times by the shocks to which we had been subjected.

"What now?" I asked as I painfully struggled to my feet.

"Another of those purple amoebas," replied Jim from the vantage point of a window. "He's looking us over as if he were trying to decide whether we are edible or not."

I JOINED him at the window. The thing which had us was a replica of the monster we had left below us engaged in battle with the green dragon which had attacked it. The same indefinite and ever changing outline was evident, as well as the four huge eyes. The thing regarded us for a moment and slowly moved us up against its bulk until we touched it. Deeper and deeper into the mass of the body we penetrated until we were in a deep cavern with the light coming to us only from the entrance. I watched the entrance and horror possessed my soul.

"The hole's closing, Jim!" I gasped. "The thing is swallowing us!"

"I expected that," he replied grimly. "The amoeba has no mouth, you know. Nourishment is passed into the body through the skin, which closes behind it. We are a modern version of Jonah and the whale, First Mortgage."

"Well, Jonah got out," I ventured.

"We'll try to," he replied. "When that critter swallowed us, he got something that will prove pretty indigestible. Let's try to give him a stomach ache. I don't suppose that a machine-gun will affect him, but we'll try it."

"I didn't know that you had any guns on board."

"Oh yes, I've got two machine-guns.

We'll turn one of them loose, but I don't expect much effect from it."

HE moved over to one of the guns and threw off the cover which had hidden it from my gaze. He fed in a belt of ammunition and pulled his trigger. For half a minute he held it down, and two hundred and fifty caliber thirty bullets tore their way into space. There was no evidence of movement on the part of our host.

"Just as I thought," remarked Jim as he threw aside the empty belt and covered the gun again. "The thing has no nervous organization to speak of and probably never felt that. We'll have to rig up a disintegrating ray for him."

"What?" I gasped.

"A disintegrating ray," he replied. "Oh yes, I know how to make the fabulous 'death ray' that you journalists are always raving about. I have never announced my discovery, for war is horrible enough without it, but I have generated it and used it in my work a number of times. Did it never occur to you that the rocket motor is built on a disintegrating ray principle?"

"Of course it is, Jim. I never thought of it in that light before, but it must be. How can you use it? The discharge from the motors is a harmless stream of energy particles."

"Instead of turning the ray into powdered aluminum and breaking it down, what is to prevent me from turning it against the body of our captor and blasting my way out?"

"I don't know."

"Well, nothing is. I'll have to modify one of the motors a little, but it's not a hard job. Get some wrenches from the tool box and we'll start."

AN hour of hard work enabled us to disconnect one of the reserve bow motors and, after the modifications Jim had mentioned, turn the ray out through the port through which the products of disintegration were meant to go. When we had bolted it in place with an improvised coupling, Jim opened the vitriolene screen which held in our air and and turned to his control board.

"Here goes," he said.

He pulled the lever to full power and with a roar which almost deafened us in the small flyer, the ray leaped out to do its deadly work. I watched through a port beside the motor. There was a flash of intense light for an instant and then the motor died away in silence. A path to freedom lay open before us. Jim started one of the stern motors and slowly we forced our way through the hole torn in the living mass. When we were almost at the surface, he threw in full power and we shot free from the amoeba and into the open. Again we were stopped in midair and drawn back toward the huge bulk. The eyes looked at us and we were turned around. As the ray swung into a position to point directly toward one of the eyes, Jim pulled the controlling lever. With the flash of light which ensued, the eye and a portion of the surrounding tissue disappeared. The amoeba writhed and changed shape rapidly, while flashes of brilliant crimson played over the remaining eyes. Again the ray was brought into play and another of the eyes disappeared. This was evidently enough for our captor, for it suddenly released us and instantly we started to fall. Jim caught the control levers and turned on our power in time to halt us only a few feet above the plain toward which we were falling. We were close to the point whence we had started up and we could see that the battle below us was still raging.

THE green dragon was partially engulfed by the amoeba, but it still relentlessly tore off huge chunks and devoured them. The amoeba was greatly reduced in bulk but it still fought gamely. Even as we approached the dragon was evidently satiated, for it slowly withdrew from the purple bulk and back away. Long feelers shot out from the amoeba's bulk toward the

dragon but they were bitten off before they could grasp their prey.

"Let's get away from here, Jim," I cried, but I spoke too late. Even as the words left my mouth the green dragon saw us and raised itself in the air, and with gaping jaws launched itself at us. It took Jim only a moment to shoot the flyer up into space, and the charge passed harmlessly beneath us. The dragon checked its headway and turned again toward us.

"Use the machine-gun, Pete!" cried Jim. "I've got to run the ship."

I threw the cover off the gun and fed in a fresh belt of ammunition. As the green monster dashed toward us I hastily aligned the gun and pulled the trigger. My aim was good and at least fifty of the bullets plowed through the approaching bulk before Jim dropped the ship and allowed it to pass above us. Again the dragon turned and charged, and again I met it with a hail of bullets. They had no apparent effect and Jim dropped the ship again and let the huge bulk shoot by above us. Twice more the dragon rushed but the last rush was less violent than had been the first three.

"The bullets are affecting him, Pete!" cried Jim as he shot the flyer upward. "Give him another dose!"

I hastily fed in another belt, but it was not needed. The dragon rushed the fifth time, but before it reached us its velocity fell off and it passed harmlessly below us and fell on a long curve to the plain below. It fell near the purple amoeba which it had battled and a long feeler shot out and grasped it. Straight into the purple mass it was drawn, and vanished into the huge bulk.

Jim started one of the stern motors. In a few seconds we were far from the scene.

"Have you any idea of which direction to go?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Have you a radio beacon?" I asked.

He withered me with a glance.

"We're beyond the heaviside layer," he reminded me.

FOR a moment I was stunned.

"We can't be very far from the hole," he said consolingly as he fumbled with the controls. "But before we try to find it, we had better disconnect one of the stern motors and rig it as a disintegrating ray so that we will have one bearing in each direction. We may meet more denizens of space who like our looks, and we haven't much ammunition left."

We landed on the plain and in an hour had a second disintegrating ray ready for action. Thus armed, we rose from the blue plain and started at random on our way. For ten minutes we went forward. Then Jim stopped the flyer and turned back. We had gone only a short distance when I called to him to stop.

"What is it?" he demanded as he brought the flyer to a standstill.

"There's another creature ahead of us," I replied. "A red one."

"Red?" he asked excitedly as he joined me. About a mile ahead of us a huge mass hung in the air. It resembled the amoeba which had attacked us, except that the newcomer was red. As we watched, it moved toward us. As it did so its color changed to purple.

"Hurrah!" cried Jim. "Don't you remember, Pete, that the one which captured us and took us out of the hole was red while in the hole and then turned purple? That thing just came out of the hole!"

"Then why can't we see the red beam?" I demanded.

"Because there's no air or anything to reflect it," he replied. "We can't see it until we are right in it."

I devoutly hoped that he was right as he headed the ship toward the waiting monster. As we approached the amoeba came rapidly to meet us and a long feeler shot out. As it did so there was a flash of intense light ahead of us as Jim turned loose the ray, and the feeler disappeared. Another and another met the same fate. Then Jim rotated the ship slightly and let out the full force of the ray toward the

monster. A huge hole was torn in it, and as we approached with our ray blazing, the amoeba slowly retreated and our path was open before us. Again there was an instant of intense heat as we passed through the red wall, and we were again in the hole which Jim's lamps had blasted through the layer. Below us still lay the fog which had obscured the earth when we had started on our upward trip.

DOWN toward the distant earth we dropped. We had gone about thirty miles before we saw on the side of the hole one of the huge amoeba which were so thick above.

"We might stop and pick that fellow off," said Jim, "but, on the whole, I think we'll experiment with him."

He drove the ship nearer and turned it on its axis, holding it in position by one of the auxiliary discharges. A flash came from our forward ray and a portion of the amoeba disappeared. A long arm moved out toward us, but it moved slowly and sluggishly instead of with the lightninglike swiftness which had characterized the movements of the others. Jimmy easily eluded it and dropped the ship a few yards. The creature pursued it, but it moved slowly. For a mile we kept our distance ahead of it, but we had to constantly decrease our speed to keep from leaving it behind. Soon we were almost at a standstill, and Jim reversed our direction and drew nearer. A feeler came slowly and feebly out a few feet toward us and then stopped. We dropped the ship a few feet but the amoeba did not follow. Jim glanced at the altimeter.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed. "We are about forty-five miles above the earth and already the air is so dense that the thing cannot move lower. They are fashioned for existence in the regions of space and in even the most rarified air they are helpless. There is no chance of one ever reaching the surface of the earth without years of gradual acclimation, and even if it did, it would be practically immobile. In a few years the layer will flow enough to plug the hole I have made, but even so, I'll build a couple of space flyers equipped with disintegrating rays as soon as we get down and station them alongside the hole to wipe out any of that space vermin which tries to come through. Let's go home. We've put in a good day's work."

Hundreds of the purple amoeba have been destroyed by the guarding ships during the past five years. The hole is filling in as Jim predicted, and in another ten years the earth will be as securely walled in as it ever was. But in the mean time, no one knows what unrevealed horrors space holds, and the world will never rest entirely easy until the slow process of time again heals the broken protective layer.

Everyone Is Invited

To "Come Over in

'THE READERS' CORNER'"!

The men of Cleric were surrounding Jaka.

Earth, the Marauder

BEGINNING A THREE-PART NOVEL

By Arthur J. Burks

FOREWORD

DESPITE the fact that for centuries the Secret of Life had been the possession of children of men, the Earth was dying. She was dying because the warmth of the sun was fading; because, with the obliteration of the oceans in order to find new land upon which men might live, her seasons had become stormy, unbearably cold and dreary; and the very fact of her knowledge of the Secret of Life, in which men numbered their ages by centuries instead of by years, was her undoing.

Out of her orbit sped the teeming Earth—a marauding planet bent on starry conquest.

For when men did not die, they multiplied beyond all counting, beyond all possibility of securing permanent abiding places. One man, in the days when the earth was young, and man lived at best to the age of three score years and ten, could have, given time and opportunity, populated a nation. Now, when men lived for centuries, eternally youthful, their living descendants ran into incalculable numbers.

The earth — strange paradox — was dying because it had learned the Secret of Life. Twenty centuries before, the last war of aggression had been fought, in order that an over-populated nation might find room in which to live. Now all the earth was one nation, speaking one tongue—and there were no more lands to conquer.

CHAPTER I

Sarka

IN his laboratory atop the highest peak in the venerable Himalayas, lived Sarka, conceded by the world to be its greatest scientist, despite his youth. His grandfather, who had watched the passing of eighteen centuries, had discovered the Secret of Life and, thoughtlessly, in the light of later developments, broadcast his discovery to the world. The genius of this man, who was also called Sarka, had been passed on to his son, Sarka the Second, and by him in even greater

degree to Sarka the Third . . . called merely Sarka for the purposes of this history.

Had Sarka lived in the days before the discovery of the Secret of Life, people of that day would have judged him a young man of twenty. His real age was four centuries.

Behind him as he sat moodily staring at the gigantic Revolving Beryl stood a woman of most striking appearance. Her name was Jaska, and according to ideas of the Days Before the Discovery, she seemed a trifle younger than Sarka. Her hand, unadorned by jewelry of any kind, rested on Sarka's shoulder as he studied the Revolving Beryl, while her eyes, whose lashes, matching her raven hair, were like the wings of tiny blackbirds, noted afresh the wonder of this man.

"What is to be done?" she asked him at last, and her voice was like music there in the room where science performed its miracles for Sarka.

WEARILY Sarka turned to face her, and she was struck anew, as she had been down the years since she had known this man, every time their glances met, at the mighty curve of his brow, which rendered insignificant his mouth, his delicate nose of the twitching nostrils, the well-deep eyes of him.

"Something must be done," he said gloomily, "and that soon! For, unless the children of men are provided with some manner of territorial expansion, they will destroy one another, only the strongest will survive, and we shall return to the days when the waters covered the earth, and monstrous creatures bellowed from the primeval slime!"

"You are working on something?" she asked softly.

For a moment he did not answer. While she waited, Jaska peered into the depths of the Revolving Beryl, which represented the earth. It was fifty feet in diameter, and in its curved surface and entrancing depths was mirrored, in this latest development of televiewy all the earth and the doings of its people. But Jaska scarcely saw the fleeting images, the men locked in conflict for the right to live, the screaming, terror-stricken women. This was now a century-old story, and the civilization of Earth had almost reached the breaking point.

No, she scarcely saw the things in the Beryl, for she had read the hint of a vast, awesome secret in the eyes of Sarka—and wondered if he dared even tell her.

"IF the people knew," he whispered, "they would do one of two things! They would tear me limb from limb, and hurl the parts of me outward into space forever—or they would demand that I move before I am ready—and cause a catastrophe which could never be rectified; and this grand old Earth of ours would be dead, indeed!"

"And this secret of yours?" Jaska now spoke in the sign language which only these two knew, for there were billions of other Revolving Beryls in the world, and words could be heard by universal radio by any who cared to listen. And always, they knew, the legions of enemies of Sarka kept their ears open for words of Sarka which could be twisted around to his undoing.

"I should not tell even you," he answered, his fingers working swiftly in their secret, silent language, which all the world could see, but which only these two understood. "For if my enemies knew that you possessed the information, there is nothing they would stop at to make you tell."

"But I would not tell, Sarka," she said softly. "You know that!"

He patted her hands, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"No," he said, "you would not tell. Some day soon—and it must be soon if the children of men are not to destroy themselves, I will tell you! It is a secret that lies heavily on my heart. If I should make a mistake. Chaos! Catastrophe! Eternal, perpetual dark,

the children of men reduced to nothingness!"

A LITTLE gasp from Jaska, for it was plain that this thing Sarka hinted at was far and away beyond anything he had hitherto done—and Sarka had already performed miracles beyond any that had ever been done by his predecessors.

"When my grandfather," went on Sarka moodily, "perfected, in this selfsame laboratory, the machinery by which the waters of the oceans could be disintegrated, our enemies called him mad, and fought their way up these mountain slopes to destroy him! With the pack at his doors, he did as he had told them he would do. Though they hurried swiftly into the great valleys to colonize them—where oceans had been—they were like ravening beasts, and gave my grandfather no thanks. Our people have always fought against progress, have always been disparaging of its advocates! When the first Sarka discovered the Secret they would have destroyed him, though he made them immortal. . . ."

"If only the Secret," interrupted Jaska, "could be returned to him who discovered it! That would solve our problem, for men then would die and be buried, leaving their places for others."

Again that weary smile on the face of Sarka.

"Take back the Secret which is known to-day to every son and daughter of woman? Impossible! More nearly impossible than the attainment of my most ambitious dream!"

"And that dream?" spoke Jaska with speeding fingers.

"I have wondered about you," said Sarka softly, while those eyes of his bored deeply into hers. "We have been the best of friends, the best of comrades; but there are times when it comes to me that I do not know you entirely! And I have many enemies!"

"You mean," gasped the woman, for the moment forgetting the secret sign manual, "you think it possible that I—I—might be one of your enemies, in secret?"

"Jaska, I do not know; but in this matter in my mind I trust no one. I am afraid even that people will read my very thoughts, though I have learned to so concentrate upon them that not the slightest hint of them shall go forth telepathically to my enemies! I do not mind death for myself; but our people must be saved! It is hideous to think that we have been given the Secret of Life, only to perish in the end because of it! I am sorry, Jaska, but I can tell no one!"

But Jaska, one of the most beautiful and intelligent of Earth's beautiful and intelligent women, seemed not to be listening to Sarka at all, and when he had finished, she shrugged her shoulders slightly and prepared to leave.

HE followed her to the nearest Exit Dome, built solidly into the side of his laboratory, and watched her as she slipped swiftly into the white, skin-tight clothing—marked on breast and back with the Red Lily of the House of Cleric. His eyes still were deeply moody.

He helped her don the gleaming metal helmet in whose skull-pan was set the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid—invented by Sarka the Second, used now of necessity by every human creature—and strode with her to the Outer Exit, a door of ponderous metal sufficiently strong to prevent the inner warmth of the laboratory getting out, or the biting cold of the heights to enter, and studied her still as she buckled about her hips her own personal Sarka-Belt, which automatically encased her, through contact with her tight clothing, with the warmth and balanced pressure of the laboratory, which would remain constant as long as she wore it.

With a nod and a brief smile, she stepped to the metal door and vanished through it. Sarka turned gloomily back to his laboratory. Looking into

the depths of the Revolving Beryl and adjusting the enlarging device which brought back, life size, the infinitesmal individuals mirrored in the Beryl, he watched her go—a trim white figure which flashed across the void, from mountain-top to her valley home, like a very white projectile from another world. Very white, and very precious, but. . . .

When she was home, and had waved to him that she had arrived safely, he forgot her for a time, and allowed his eyes to study the inner workings of this vast, crowded world whose on-rushing fate was so filling his brain with doubt, with fear—and something of horror!

CHAPTER II

The People of the Hives

MOODILY Sarka stared into the depths of the Beryl, which represented the Earth, and in which he could see everything that earthlings did, after visually enlarging them, through use of a microscope that could be adjusted, with relation to the Beryl, to bring out in detail any section of the world he wished to study. His face was utterly sad. The people at last truly possessed the Earth—all of it that was, even with the aid of every miracle known to science, habitable.

The surface of the Earth was one vast building, like a hive, and to each human being was allotted by law a certain abiding place. But men no longer died, unless they desired to do so, and then only when the Spokesmen of the Gens saw fit to grant permission; and there soon would be no place for the newborn to live. Even now that point had practically been reached throughout the world, and in the greater portion it *had* been reached, and passed, and men knew that while men did not die, they could be killed!

The vast building, towering above what had once been the surface of the earth, to heights undreamed of before the discovery, was irregular on its top, to fit the contour of the earth, and its roof, constructed of materials raped from the earth's core, was so designed as to catch and concentrate the yearly more feeble rays of the sun, so that its life-giving warmth might continue to be the boon of living people.

IT had been found as Earth cooled that life was possible to a depth of eight miles below the one-time surface, so that the one huge building extended below the surface to this great depth, and was divided and re-divided to make homes for men, their wives, and their progeny. But even so, space was limited. Neighboring families outgrew their surroundings, overflowed into the habitations of their neighbors—and every family was at constant war against its neighbors.

Men did not die, but they could be slain, and there was scarcely a home, above or below, in all the vast building, which had not planned and executed murder, times and times—or which had not left its own blood in the dwelling places of neighbors.

No law could cope with this intolerable situation, for men, down the ages, had changed in their essential characteristics but little—and recognized one law only in their extremity, that of self-preservation.

So there was murder rampant, and mothers who wept for children, husbands, fathers or mothers, who would never return to their homes.

"My grandfather," whispered Sarka, his eyes peering deeply into a certain area beyond that assigned by law to the House of Cleric, where men of two neighboring families were locked in mortal, silent conflict, "should not have frustrated the mad scheme of Dalis! It was slaughter, wholesale and terrible, but it would have cleansed the souls of the survivors!"

MENTALLY Sarka was looking back now to that red day when Dalis, the closest scientific rival of Sarka the First, had come to Sarka the

First with his proposal which at the time had seemed so hideous. Sarka remembered that interval in all its details, for he had heard it many times.

"Sarka," Dalis had said in his high-pitched voice, staring at Sarka the First out of red-rimmed, fiery eyes, "unless something is done the world will rush on to self-destruction! Men will slay one another! Fathers will kill their sons, and sons their fathers, if something is not done! For always there is marrying and giving in marriage, and each family is reaching out in all directions, seeking merely space in which to live. Formerly there were wars which automatically took thought of the overplus of men; but to-day the world is at peace, as men regard the term—and every man's hand is against his neighbor! There will be no more wars, when there should be! There is but one alternative!"

"And that?" Sarka the First had queried suspiciously.

"The segregation of the fittest! The destruction, swiftly, painlessly, of all the others! And when the survivors have again re-populated the earth to overflowing—a repetition of the same corrective! Men will die, yes, by millions; but those who are left will be a stronger, sturdier race, and by this process of elimination, century by century, men will evolve and become super-men!"

"And this plan of yours?"

FOR a moment Dalis had paused, breathing heavily, as though almost afraid to continue. Then, while Sarka the First had listened in frozen terror, Dalis had explained his ghastly scheme.

"If it were not for the mountains and the valleys," said Dalis, "and the world were perfectly round and smooth of surface, that surface would be covered by water to the depth of one mile! Is that not correct! The Earth, rotating on its axis, travels about the sun at the rate of something like nineteen miles per second, so perfectly balanced that the oceans remain almost quiescent in their beds! But, Sarka, mark me well! If we could, together, devise a way to halt this rotation for as much as a few seconds, what would happen?"

"What would happen?" repeated Sarka the First, dropping his own voice to a husky, frightened whisper. "Why, the oceans would be hurled out of their beds, and a wall of water a mile high or more—it is all guesswork!—would rush eastward around the world, bearing everything before it! It would uproot and destroy buildings, sweep the rocky covering of the earth free of soil; and humanity, caught on the earth below the highest level of the world's greatest tidal wave, would be engulfed!"

"Exactly!" Dalis had said with a grin. "Exactly! Only—the people we wish to survive could be warned, and these could either be aloft when the tidal wave swept the face of the earth, or could be safely out of reach of the waters on the sides of the highest mountains!"

SARKA THE FIRST, wanly smiling, catching his breath at last, now that he realized the utter impossibility of this mad scheme, had been minded to humor the fancies of a man whom he had believed not quite sane.

"Why not," he began, "take away from men the Secret of Life, so that they will die, as formerly, when the world was young?"

"When all the world knows the Secret, when even children learn it before they are capable of walking?" demanded Dalis sarcastically. "You could only remove knowledge of the Secret from the brains of men by removing those brains themselves! Your thought is more terrible even than mine, because it leads to this inescapable conclusion!"

"But supposing for a moment your mad scheme were possible, who should say whom, of all the earth's people, should be saved, whom sacrificed?"

"What better test could be given

than that which I am proposing?" Dalis had snarled. "Those worthy of being saved would save themselves! Those who would perish would not be worth saving! As natural, as inescapable as the law of the survival of the fittest, which has been an axiom of life since men first crawled out of the slime and asked each other questions as they caught their first glimpses of the stars and pondered the reasons for them!"

"But where, then, was there any point in my giving to people the Secret of Life?"

"Had you paused to think," snapped Dalis, "you would never have done so! Your lust for power, and for fame, destroyed your foresight!"

"AND is it not, Dalis," replied Sarka the First, softly, "for this, really, that you have come to me? To berate me? To throw at my head mad schemes impossible of accomplishment? I have always known you for an enemy, Dalis, because you are envious of what I have accomplished, what you sense that I will accomplish as time passes!"

"I do not love you, Sarka!" retorted Dalis frankly. "I despise you! Hate you! But I need the aid of that keen brain of yours! You see, hate you though I may, I do you honor still. I have something up here," tapping the dome of his brow, only less lofty than that of Sarka, "which you lack. You have something I have not, never can attain! But together we are complements, each of the other, and to the two of us this scheme is possible!"

"I am very busy, Dalis," Sarka the First had replied coldly. "I must ask you to leave me! What you propose is impossible, unthinkable!"

"So," retorted Dalis, "you think me mad? You think me incapable of perfecting this plan about whose details you have not even yet been informed! You would show me the door as though you were a king, and I a slave—when kings and slaves vanished from the earth millenniums ago! Then listen to me, Sarka! I know how to do this thing about which I have told you. I can halt, for a brief moment only, the whirl of the earth about its axis. And by so doing I can flood the earth with the waters of the oceans! If you will not listen to me, I shall do it myself! You shall have two days in which to give me an answer, for I admit that I need you, who would balance me, make sure I made no fatal mistakes! But if you do not, I will act . . . along the lines I have hinted!"

APPARENTLY as unconcerned as though he had not just listened to a scheme for almost total depopulation of the world, the destruction of millions upon millions of lives, Sarka the First had dismissed Dalis—who had straightway used all his offices to arouse the world of science against the first Sarka.

But, when the two days of grace given by Dalis had passed, there were no oceans—for Sarka the First had been planning for a century against the time when the earth must of necessity be over-populated, and had worked and slaved in his laboratory against the contingency which had developed.

He had smiled, though there was a trace of fear on his face after Dalis had left, for *his* scheme had been worked out—not to destroy, but to save!

And from this same laboratory in which Sarka now sat and pondered on the next step in man's expansion, Sarka the First had, in fear and trembling at first, but with his confidence growing by leaps and bounds, worked his own miracle. Untold millions and billions of rays, whose any portion of which, coming in contact with water, immediately separated its hydrogen and oxygen, thus disintegrating its molucles, were hurled forth from their storehouses beneath the laboratory, across the faces of the mighty oceans of Earth. . . .

And when men saw the miracle, they rushed into the mighty valleys where

the oceans had been, and began to build new homes!

THAT had been centuries ago—scores of centuries.

Now all the earth, all the livable part of the earth, above its surface—and below it to the depths of miles—was filled with people, like bees in a monster hive, like ants of antiquity in their warrened hills. And there was no place now that they could go.

So they fought among themselves for the right to live.

"But my grandfather was right!" Sarka almost screamed it, speaking aloud in the silence of his laboratory. "My grandfather was right! Dalis was wrong! Science should be the science of Life, not of Death! Yet whither shall we go! Where now shall we find places for our people who are daily being born in myriads, to live, and love and flourish?"

But there was no answer. Only the humming of the perpetually revolving Beryl, which showed to the sad eyes of Sarka that the people of his beloved earth were rushing onward to Chaos, unless. . . .

"If only I could be sure about Jaska!" he moaned. "If only my courage were as great as that of which I stand in need! For if I fail, even Dalis, had he succeeded with that scheme of his in grandfather's time, would be less a monster, less a criminal!"

CHAPTER III

The Spokesmen of the Gens

FOR a long moment Sarka looked broodingly out across the world beyond the metalized glass which formed the curving dome of his laboratory roof. There was little that could be seen, for always the mighty, cold winds, ruffed with flurries of snow and particles of ice, swept over this artificial roof of the world. Here and there huge portions of the area within the range of his normal vision were swept clear and clean of snow and ice—and looked bluely, bitterly cold and hostile.

Without the Sarka-Belts, people who ventured forth from their hives would instantly freeze to the consistency of marble in those winds and storms. For the people of Earth had built their monster habitation toward the stars until they reached up into the altitude of perpetual cold.

Only under that gleaming roof was there warmth. Many of the men, and women, and children who had lost in the now century-old fight for survival had merely been tossed out of the hives. A painless, swift death—but each death, in a world so highly specialized that each grown person fitted into his niche naturally and easily, was a distinct loss, not much, perhaps, but enough for the loss to be felt.

SARKA, closing his eyes for a moment as though to shut out a horror which in his mind he could visualize, turned back to the Revolving Beryl, in which he kept in constant touch with all parts of the world at will.

"It *must* be done!" he muttered. "I must take action. It means the loss of thousands, perhaps millions of lives, in such a war as the mind of man has not hitherto conceived; but for a Cause greater than any which has ever hitherto been an excuse for armed conflict. But I must discuss it with the Spokesmen of the Gens!"

On the table before Sarka was a row of vari-colored lights, whose source was beneath the floor of the laboratory, out of the heart of the master-mountain, part of the intricate machinery of this laboratory which had been almost twenty centuries in the perfecting. In the dwelling place of each of the Spokesmen was a single light, colored like one of the lights on Sarka's table. To speak with any one of the Spokesmen Sarka had but to dim the properly colored light by covering it with the palm of his hand. The light in the home of the thus signalled Spokesman was dimmed, and the Spokesman

would know that Sarka desired to converse with him.

Sarka noted the blue light, and shuddered. For if he covered it with his palm it would summon Dalis, a great scientist, but an erratic one, as Sarka the First had so clearly shown.

Sarka turned again to the Beryl. The area of which Dalis was Spokesman was, roughly speaking, that part of what had once been the Pacific Ocean, north of a line drawn east and west through the southernmost of the Hawaian Islands, northward to the Pole. The home of Dalis was in the heart of what had once been an island historians claimed had been called Oahu, now a mountain peak still retaining a hint of the pre-Discovery name: Ohi.

THE total number of the Spokesmen, the oldest of earth's inhabitants, was twelve, and the remainder of the Earth not under the tutelary rule of Dalis was divided up among the other eleven Spokesmen. Cleric, for example, father of Jaska, was Spokesman of that area which men had once called Asia, the vast valleys of the once Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean; while the youngest of the Spokesmen, in a manner serving his apprenticeship, was tutelary head of the vast plateau once called Africa. The name of this man was Gerd.

"He, at least," thought Sarka, thinking of each Spokesman in turn and cataloguing each in his mind, "will be with me. I wonder about the others, and especially Dalis. He has always hated us!"

Then, with the air of a man who has made up his mind and crosses his particular Rubicon in a single step, Sarka rose to his feet and passed along the row of vari-colored lights, covering each one with his hand in rapid succession.

Then he sat down again, almost holding his breath, and waited. As he stared at the row of lights his eyes lingered longest on two which were almost golden in color—and his face was very gentle, almost reverent. For those two lights were signals to Sarka the First and Sarka the Second, his grandfather and his father!

IT was Dalis, the irascible, the fiery tempered, the erratic, who first made answer.

"Yes! What is it now?"

Sarka smiled a trifle grimly as he spoke a single word.

"Wait!"

The voice of Dalis, which Sarka had good cause to remember, had sounded as loudly in the laboratory as though Dalis had been present there in person, for men had learned to communicate by voice almost without the aid of radio and its appurtenances though the principle upon which the first crude beginnings of radio were fashioned still applied. Each man's dwelling place was both a "sender" and a "receiver," and men could talk and be talked to no matter where they lived—individuals telepathically summoned at desire of anyone wishing verbal contact.

"Gerd is here!" came the voice of that Spokesman.

To him also Sarka spoke one word.

"Wait!"

"I am here, Sarka!" came a musical voice. "And Jaska is with me, listening!"

That would be Cleric, loyal friend, master scientist, but always shy of contact with people, though swift to anger and self-forgetfulness when he knew himself right and was opposed. Sarka darted a look back at the Revolving Beryl, adjusted swiftly the Beryl-microscope, and smiled into the faces of Jaska and Cleric, who looked enough alike that they might have been brother and sister, though Cleric had been born ten centuries before his daughter Jaska. They smiled back at him.

HE shifted the Beryl-microscope and stared for a second at Dalis, there in the Beryl, and marked the antagonism Dalis was at no pains to hide.

One by one the Spokesmen reported.

Klaser, from the Americas; Durce from the valleys of the vanished Atlantic; Boler from that part of the Artic Circle not included in the wedge which the Gens of Dalis thrust northward to the Pole; Vardee; Prull; Yuta; Aal; Vance and Hime. Each from his appointed area, each from the official headquarters of his Gens, the name given to those people who acknowledged the tutelage of a Spokesman. Each Spokesman, therefore, was the mouthpiece of millions of men, women and children. And over the Spokesmen, and not themselves Spokesmen, were three scientists: The Sarkas, First, Second and Third.

When all twelve of the Spokesmen had reported and been bidden by Sarka to wait, a smile touched the face of Sarka for an instant as two other voices, so nearly alike they might have been the voice of a single person, reported themselves.

"I am here, son! What is it?"

Oddly enough, Sarka's father and grandfather reported with exactly the same words. Sarka smiled at a whimsical thought of his own. It had been some time since the three scientist Sarkas had been together, and despite the vast differences in their ages they might have been triplets!

THE reports were in and the Spokemen were waiting; but for almost a minute Sarka waited still. Then he spoke swiftly those words for which there could be no recall:

"Gentlemen, the time is come when we must go to war!"

For a long moment after he had spoken there was no answer. Then it came, in the jeering laughter of the antagonistic Dalis.

"War? Against whom? The Sarkas are always dreaming!"

"And Dalis," continued Sarka, "shall be one of the leaders of Earthlings in this war which I am about to propose! You doubtless recall a proposal you once made to Sarka the First? Your proposal to halt for a few moments the headlong whirl of the earth about its axis, thus to flood—"

"Stop!" interrupted Dalis. "Stop! Immediately!"

And Sarka stopped. He had forgotten, in the excitement of his urge to explain his plans, that the millions of people who gave official allegiance to Dalis had never been informed of the hideous proposal he had made, back there centuries ago, as a corrective for a world rapidly approaching over-population. Had his people known, never again would the voice of Dalis be heard in life. The Spokesmen knew, and the Sarkas; but no others. Sarka understood the protest of Dalis; honored it.

"Dalis," he went on, more softly, "after I have explained what I wish to do, you will come to me here, prepared to explain to me exactly how you planned doing what you proposed to my grandfather—for your knowledge will be necessary to me. . . ."

"Isn't it enough that your grandfather stole from me, and amplified, an idea that would have made me forever famous, without his grandson also stealing the fruit of my brains?"

"Your brains," said Sarka sharply, "belong to your people. What I plan is for their betterment. But it means war, war which may last a century, two centuries, in which lives of countless thousands may be lost."

SARKA'S last words were almost drowned out by the humming sound that came out of the Revolving Beryl, that perfected device which was the ultimate in the evolution of television and vibration-transference. Sarka's heart sank, for he knew the meaning of that sound. So did the Spokesmen.

"You see?" came the rasping voice of Dalis. "You hear? Look into your Beryl! See the clenched fists of the earth's myriads being shaken at you! Listen to the protests of the millions who hear your every word! See what Earthlings think of the prospect of war!"

For a moment Sarka spoke directly to the people.

"Be silent and listen! It will be war, yes; but not such a skulking, hideous war as ye wage among yourselves for a place to live! You, fathers, are guilty of slaying your sons! You, sons, of slaying your fathers! Merely by thrusting them forth from the hives, into the Outer Cold! This war I propose shall be a war that shall match your manhood, if ye indeed be men! Listen to me, and I will find for you new lands to conquer, new homes for your holding, if ye can take them!"

"But where," interrupted the sarcastic voice of Dalis, "are these new lands of which you speak? Inside the Earth? Already our hives reach into the Earth a distance of eight miles. Where else, then?"

"For shame, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, "and you a scientist! Every bit of habitable land on this globe is some man's dwelling place! Spokesmen of the Gens of Earth, look out your windows! Look out and upward—and read Dalis' answer in the stars!"

FOR a full minute there was silence throughout the earth, and Sarka saw that the Spokesmen were doing his bidding. He himself looked out, out through the swirling storm which tore at the crest of the Himalayas, a dark and forbidding Outside, in the starred dome of which rode the pale orbed moon!

"It is obvious, son," came the voice of Sarka the First, "what you mean. But how accomplish it?"

"Fifteen centuries ago, my father's father," cried Sarka, "Dalis told you that he possessed the power to halt for a moment the headlong whirl of the world on its axis about the sun! He could do it then—and no man, whatever he may think of Dalis as a man, has ever known him to lie! If, fifteen centuries ago, he could bring the whirling world to pause, why can we not, now. . . ."

And, even though he had thought of this for years upon end, had spoken over and over to himself the words he was now using, rehearsing his proposed argument to the Spokesmen of the Gens, Sarka found himself for a moment almost afraid to continue and speak them.

"I understand, Sarka!" came the excited voice of Gerd, youngest of the Spokesmen. "And I follow wherever you think it best to lead! You mean . . . you mean. . . ."

"Exactly!" Sarka managed at last. "If the Earth can be stayed on its axis, it can be diverted from its orbit entirely! I know, for I have found the manner of its doing, though I need the genius of Dalis to check my work and my calculations! We have no new land on this Earth to conquer; but the Universe is filled with countless other worlds! What say ye, Spokesmen of the Gens? What say ye, Gens of Earth?"

But for the time of a thousand heartbeats neither the Spokesmen or the Gens made answer to Sarka, and all the world fell utterly silent, absorbing this unbelievable thing of which Sarka had hinted.

OVER the metalized roof of the world the snows and storms, the winds and the wraiths of the long dead moaned and screamed as with an icy voice of abysmal warning.

And for the time of those thousand heartbeats, the world was pausing to listen.

When realization came, the answer would come from the Spokesmen and from the Gens; and here in the Sarka laboratory, his Rubicon crossed at last, sat Sarka, staring through the Beryl-microscope into the depths of the Revolving Beryl. His face was dead white, his eyes narrowed.

The first voice which came startled him.

"It is mad, Sarka! Mad! Mad! But I am with you, always!"

It was the voice of Jaska, daughter of Cleric!

CHAPTER IV

The Earthlings Make Ready

"I TOO, am with you!" came the voice of Gerd.

"Spoken like a child!" snapped Dalis. "For you are as much a child as this third of the dreaming Sarkas! The scheme is mad, madder even than Jaska intimates! The scheme I once proposed, in which I was cheated by the grandfather of this madman, was times and times more feasible and practicable!"

"Suppose," came the soft voice of Sarka the First, interrupting Dalis, "that you put the matter up to your Gens, O wise and noble Dalis, and see which scheme they would endorse if given the choice in the matter—and were your scheme still possible!"

This quickly silenced the vituperation of Dalis, but in no wise prevented his continuance as a rather loud antagonist of the plan.

"How," he demanded, "can you return the Earth to its orbit, even granting you are able to take this initial step? How keep life on the Earth during its flight on this rainbow-chasing voyage you propose?"

"All these things have been taken into consideration, O Dalis!" retorted Sarka. "All of my scheme is practicable, as I think you will agree when I have told you its details. What think you of the plan, Klaser? And you, Durce? Boler? Vardee? Prull? Yuta? Aal? Vance? Hime?"

When the Spokesmen had answered, some of them hesitantly, for the people all this time had remained silent—and none of the Spokesmen could be sure how his own Gens would feel in the matter—it developed that seven of the Spokesmen were for the scheme, if it should prove to be possible.

"If this is the voice of the majority of the Gens," snapped Dalis, "given thus by their Spokesmen, then I vote with the majority! I shall call upon you immediately, Sarka, for a conference!"

"I AM glad," said Sarka softly, "that the majority of the Spokesmen are with me. Especially am I glad that Dalis and Cleric vote with me. For the others I have only this to say: I have thought this matter over for almost a century, and I know that the time has come when we must act, to save ourselves from self-destruction. Had you not decided with me, I should have acted alone!"

"Yes?" snapped Dalis. "How?"

"I have, here in my laboratory," replied Sarka, "the power whereby to accomplish the scheme of which I have told you! Had all the Gens defied me, I would have nevertheless sent the Earth outward on its voyage, bringing it within reach of the denizens, first of the Moon, second of Mars—and you people of little courage would have been compelled to fight to save yourselves!"

"You would have forced us into war?" came the quavering voice of Prull, the first Spokesman aside from Dalis to take active part in the discussion. "Then why, if you had the means in the beginning to enforce your will upon us, confer with us at all?"

Sarka thrilled with satisfaction, for this question gave him the excuse he sought. He had been wondering and scheming how to compel the Spokesmen of the Gens to obey his will.

"I wanted your opinions," he said shortly. "But I also wish you to know that I have the power to go on, whether you wish it or not—*and you must obey me!*"

HOW would the twelve Gens take this ultimatum of Sarka? For breathless moments after he had spoken he waited, and the Spokesmen with him. Then came the voice of Cleric, addressing his people, yet leaving the contacts open so that Sarka and the other Spokesmen might hear.

"What say you, O Gens of Cleric?" he cried, his voice an exultant, clarioning paean of rejoicing. "Do we follow this man who promises us life again?

Do we follow this man who promises us that once again we shall dwell in plenty, without the blood of relatives and neighbors on our hands? Answer this man, O Gens—for I say unto you that wheresoever he leads I would follow him!"

Silence for a heartbeat. Then a murmuring like the sound of the waves of the long-vanished seas sounded in the laboratory, wherein all things were seen, all sounds were heard. A monster voice, loud and savage, from the Gens of Cleric.

"We follow Cleric wherever he leads!" Finally the words became intelligible. "It matters not to us whom Cleric follows, so long as we may follow Cleric!"

"Well spoken, O Gens of Cleric!" snapped Sarka when the murmuring died down to a whisper, then faded out entirely. "Deck yourselves in the white garments of Cleric! Emblazon upon your backs and breast the Red Lily of his House! Prepare for war! These are your orders; the details I leave to Cleric!"

There came the voice of Dalis.

"Give your orders to my Gens direct, O Sarka!" rasped Dalis. "For I leave this very moment to come to you!"

"Thank you," said Sarka, a great wave of exaltation sweeping over him. He had expected Dalis to be the last and most difficult to manage. Then to the Gens of Dalis, as the blue light on the table in the laboratory showed Sarka that Dalis was already winging toward him: "Deck yourselves in the green garments of Dalis! Wear as your insignia the yellow star of his House, and prepare for war! Make new and modern Ray Directors! Refurbish your rotting machines of destruction! Make ready, and make haste! For the Gens of Dalis will be the first of all the Gens to move in attack against the Dwellers Outside! When the time comes I shall tell you where you shall dwell—if you win the land I shall show you!"

THE humming of myriad voices inside the laboratory was now almost continuous, but ever the words of Sarka went out to the Spokesmen and to the Gens, though, save in the case of Cleric and of Dalis, he did not speak to the Gens direct, because he did not wish in one iota to usurp the authority of the Spokesmen themselves.

But when less than an hour had passed, he realized that the first step had been successfully taken, and that from now on the success or failure of the scheme rested in his own hands. Perspiration bedewed his forehead, and for a second he prayed.

"God of our fathers! Grant that we be not mistaken! Grant that we be right in what we plan! Grant that success attend our arms! Grant that this scheme of mine lead us not to catastrophe—for if this should develop, only I am guilty, and only I should be punished!"

"Amen!"

As one voice the Spokesmen of the Gens spoke the word, and Sarka heard it. He had forgotten for the moment that the Spokesmen still could hear him.

"That is all," he said huskily. "Prepare your Gens, each of you, for such battle as even our histories never have recorded! For we go against foemen whose strength we do not know, whose manner of life we do not know, and we must not fail! Make haste with your preparations! Your time is short! And Spokesmen, counsel your Gens that they put aside at once all personal differences, all family quarrels, all quarrels with their neighbors! That each adult individual, each unmarried woman, and such married woman as have all their children grown, and who no longer need them, prepare to go forth to battle! From this laboratory, within a brief space, Dalis and the Sarkas will give you further word!"

THEN he dimmed the lights, and severed contact with the Spokesmen of the Gens. Only two lights he

did not dim, at the moment, and to two men he spoke softly.

"My father and my father's father! Come to me at once! For there shall be need of the combined genius of the Sarkas if my scheme is to succeed!"

From both Sarkas, as though they had rehearsed the words against this need of them, came answer:

"Aye, son, we come!"

From that moment on until Dalis and the Sarkas were ready to take the most momentous step ever taken in the history of the world, the humming within the laboratory did not cease. For the people, the millions and billions of people of the hives, were busy, eagerly and feverishly busy, preparing new armament, new engines of destruction, against the time when there should be need of them. And for perhaps the first time in centuries, the people were happy.

For not even the passage of a thousand centuries, or a thousand thousand centuries, could flush from the warm hearts of men the love of conflict!

Sarka smiled wanly, his face very pale. He had spoken, his people were busy with preparations, and now there could be no turning back. The world, when he spoke the word, would rush outward to glorious conflict—or to destruction!

A buzzer sounded near the Exit Dome. Sarka raced to give the "Enter" Signal—and Dalis, he of the hawk-eyes, the sharp nose and sharper tongue, entered the presence of the man who, in a twinkling, had made himself master of the world.

"Well," he said harshly, "I am here! What do you wish of me?"

"We Sarkas," said Sarka easily, "wish to assure ourselves that you will do nothing to obstruct our plans! Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, you are prisoner of the Sarkas until you have passed your word!"

"That I will never do!" said Dalis calmly. "I have passed my word to go forward with you; but I meant, and you knew I meant to go forward only as far as to me seemed right and reasonable!"

CHAPTER V

The Betrayal of Dalis

AND until the arrival of the other two Sarkas, Dalis said nothing. His faced flushed an angry red as Sarka the First received the "Enter" Signal and stepped into the laboratory which had once been his—which he had delivered into the capable hands of Sarka the Second, in order to find new channels for his genius, as a worker for the betterment of the world's people. This he had found in organization, so that the people worked and labored, despite their personal quarrels, in closer harmony than they ever had before. But now Sarka the Third had called, and the two Sarkas responded. Dalis snarled at his ancient enemy, who looked to be the image of Sarka the Third and not one whit older, though one had preceded the other into the world by many centuries.

"Still the pleasant, congenial Dalis, I see!" smiled Sarka the First.

FOR the moment it seemed that Dalis would die there of his seething anger; but he answered no word for all of a minute. Then:

"This mad grandson of yours has made me a prisoner, until such time as I concur in all his plans!"

"If he says you are a prisoner, that you are!" snapped the elder Sarka angrily. "Son, what is this thing you plan?"

"For almost a century," replied Sarka, "I have been planning this. I knew, when father told me that Dalis had sworn he was able to halt for a moment the headlong flight of the Earth in its orbit, that Dalis did not lie or bluff! In your day, even, that was possible, and I continued with the knotty problem until I deduced the manner of its doing. I, too, can halt the Earth's rotation, or throw it out of its orbit! I took your idea, Dalis, *in-*

dependently of you, knowing you would never reveal your secret to a Sarka, and amplified it until I can not only halt the Earth in its orbit, but throw it out of its orbit entirely!"

For a moment Sarka studied the angry face of Dalis, and his own was very thoughtful.

"Dalis," he said at last, "I wish you were not our enemy! For you are a genius, and the world has need of all the knowledge of such genius as it possesses. Why do you oppose us?"

"Because," snarled Dalis, "I guessed something of your plan that I do not like! I do not like the Sarkas, never have; but neither have the Sarkas any love for me! When you spoke to us all, I knew that somehow you had discovered the secret! You spoke, when you delivered your ultimatum, of attacking the Moon, and after it Mars! You also granted to my Gens what would have seemed a great honor—to anyone who did not fathom the tricky scheming of the Sarkas!—that of being the first into the fray! If we are to be first, and the Moon is to be the first attacked, then you plan to relieve the world forever of me, your archenemy, by exiling me and all my Gens upon the Moon! A dead world, covered with ashes, whose people dwell in dank caverns, like gnomes of the underworld. ."

"STAY!" snapped Sarka. "But I granted you a greater honor even than that, Dalis! I planned on your Gens, led by you, making a successful conquest of the Moon—because only such a genius as Dalis could force from this dead world a living for his Gens! Because you are the wisest of the Spokesmen, I planned for you the greatest task! Because I need you . I do not slay you!"

"I thank you," bowing low, with the deepest sarcasm, "but you honor me too much! And tell me, pray, if it is not true that you plan for the Sarkas their choice of the best and newest worlds of the Universe?"

Sarka did not answer for a second, while his sensitive nostrils quivered with fury. The Sarkas had not noticed, but Jaska, daughter of Cleric, had admitted herself through the Exit Dome, in a way known only to Sarka and to herself, as she had entered many times before so as not to disturb Sarka at his labors. She now stood silently there, divesting herself of her Belt and outer clothing, beneath which was the golden toga worn by all the women of the earth. Dalis, however, had seen her, and his eyes narrowed craftily as he awaited the answer of Sarka.

"Dalis," said Sarka softly, "it is not for you to question me, but to obey me! I have not undertaken this step without mastering all its details, and I refuse to allow you to swerve me in a single one of them from my plan."

DALIS straightened, standing stiffly at savage attention, and met the angry eyes of Sarka without flinching. There was no fear in Dalis, as all the world knew. But he was a schemer, and selfish.

"After all," he said, "I have known Sarkas to make promises they could not keep! How do I know, how does the world know, that you can do what you say you can do?"

"If," said Sarka, "I close all contact of this laboratory with the world outside, so that none may hear what I say save we four, and I then whisper here the secret you never told, Dalis, when my father's father refused to help you—will you then believe?"

The face of Dalis went suddenly white, but he nodded, his eyes burning redly. Jaska moved closer to the men, who stood near the table of the varicolored lights.

"You needed my father's father," said Sarka softly, "because the secret of your scheme rested here in this laboratory, which is the highest point in the world! You pretended to need him in your scheme; but you did not need my father's father, though you *did* need his laboratory, and some of the

facts of science that *he* discovered. So you came to him with your scheme, discovered that he believed, though he denied it, your scheme was possible—because he refused to aid you in it! Then, as an excuse to re-enter this laboratory, you told him you would return within two days! Now, shall I tell you your secret?"

THE lips of Dalis were moving soundlessly. His right hand started to rise, as though he would make it signal the negative he was unable for a moment to speak. But even as he stood there, swaying slightly on his feet, Sarka dashed to the lights on the table, disconnecting them one by one; to the Revolving Beryl, which then ceased to revolve for the first time in centuries—whirled when he had finished, and stepped to the very center of the room.

"Now," he whispered, "your secret, Dalis!"

Still the hand upraised, still Dalis tried to speak, and could not.

Sarka spoke, in a horse, almost terrified whisper, four words:

"The Beryl! The Ovoids!"

Gasps of surprise from the other two Sarkas, whose eyes for a second flashed to the huge Beryl, which now was still, silent—and blind. Dawning compresension was evident in their faces.

"The success of the Revolving Beryl," whispered Sarka, "which sees all that transpires in this world, depends on one fact: that its revolving is proportionately timed to infinite exactness with the revolution of the Earth about its axis! This Beryl is the Master Beryl of the Earth, which was why Dalis needed this Beryl, and could use no other!

"SUPPOSE that for a period of two days, uniformly progressive, this Beryl were forced to revolve in sharp jerks at an increasing rate of speed! With all connections in place, and all the world's Beryls attuned to the speed of this one—what would happen? What would happen if a single Gens were marshalled in warlike array atop the area of the Gens, and kept up a steady, rhythmic march for a period of hours?"

"In a few hours," whispered Sarka the First, "the roof of the Gens area would begin to vibrate, to vibrate throughout all the area, and even into all surrounding Gens areas—and in time the roof would collapse!"

"Exactly!" said Sarka, breathing heavily. "This Beryl, when attuned to all other Beryls in the world, would have this vibratory effect, not only on a certain area of the world—but upon the entire world! Force the speed of the Beryls to the uttermost limit, and you sway the world to your will! As a marching horde would sway the roof of a vast section of the world if the horde's commander willed!

"But that is not enough! The world would tremble, but nothing more! The Earth's store of Ovidum, which is Anti-Gravitational, and used in minute quantities in our Anti-Gravitational Ovoids, is evenly distributed throughout the world. By vibration of the Beryls I can control it, scatter it or gather it all together wherever I will! By shifting through vibration this Anti-Gravitational material, I can disrupt, make uneven, or nullify the pull of gravity on the Earth!"

"That would do it," said Dalis, finding his voice at last; "but how would you control the course the Earth would take, thus thrown out of its orbit?"

"That, my dear Dalis, is for the moment my secret!"

"But is it?" Dalis suddenly shouted.

BEFORE the three Sarkas could recover from their surprise at the man's sudden vehemence, he made a swift, terrifying move. He leaped away from them to stand beside Jaska, daughter of Cleric.

"Sarka," he shrieked, "I know you love this woman! Note this little tube I hold against her side. With it I can cause her to vanish for all time, merely

by a slight pressure of the fingers! And that will I do, unless you immediately open all contacts with the world and remain silent while I tell the people of Earth how you would betray them!"

The three Sarkas were petrified with amazement and horror, for they recognized the slender tube in the hand of Dalis as a Ray Director, the world's greatest engine of destruction, and knew that it would do exactly as Dalis had said it would.

Automatically, because they were brave men, they had stepped a trifle closer to Jaska and Dalis. Perspiration poured from their cheeks as they stared at this rebel. But their fears were for Jaska, who now spoke for the first time.

"Let him do as he wills," she said smilingly, "since for the good of the world I do not fear to die! Refuse him, Sarka, and know that I go into Death's Darkness loving you always, and knowing that you will succeed in the end, in spite of the opposition of men like Dalis!"

A MAN of unexpected actions, this Dalis, for while the attentions of the Sarkas were on the little tableau he had staged, his eyes had darted to the Beryl, to the control which Sarka had touched to still its revolving. Now he sprang away from Jaska, was free of her and the Sarkas before any could move to intercept him.

He dashed to the Beryl. Instantly it swept into motion, while Dalis whirled to face the Sarkas, and from his lips came a burst of triumphant laughter. One hand was on the Beryl Control, the other still held the Ray Director.

"Fools!" he cried. "Fools! Duped like children! And now it is Dalis who is master of the world! Move closer to me, and I will turn my Ray Director upon this Beryl, which you have so kindly informed me is master of all the Beryls and of all Ovidum deposits! Be glad that I do not turn it upon you; but for you I have a kinder, more honorable fate! I now am master, and will direct the destiny of the world! But I will never leave it, because I suspect that it is the most pleasant of all the worlds! I will, however, choose for the Sarkas a world that shall be the dreariest in all the Universe!"

The Sarkas whirled as soft laughter came from Jaska, daughter of Cleric. Strange, lilting laughter. They turned in time to see her vanish through the Exit Dome; but for a long moment her jeering laughter seemed to sound in the laboratory she had left—and, to judge by her laughter, had betrayed! For Dalis, arch-traitor, echoed her laughter!

CHAPTER VI

The Beryls in Tune

"REMEMBER," said Dalis, as the Beryl began to revolve and its humming mounted moment by moment to normal, "that you must concur in whatever I say to the people of the Earth—for if you do not, I swear that I will destroy this Master Beryl! Then what happens to your scheme, Sarka the Third? You see, there is no change in the plans, save one: I am the master, not you!"

Dalis was not a madman, for the world conceded him place in its list of geniuses next below the three Sarkas, which was high honor indeed; but Dalis possessed in abundance that most universal of all human emotions—jealousy. For centuries he had been nursing it, watching the Sarkas always in the niches just above him, yet never being able to attain to their eminence. Now. . .

He had outwitted them. It might be for a moment only, but while his mastery lasted he would drink deeply of personal satisfaction. Now, however, there was no gloating in his face, for he realized, as Sarka had realized, the infinite gravity of the whole situation. If a mistake were made, the world would plunge to destruction—or go cooling forever in a headlong race through space.

"I keep the Ray Director hidden," he whispered, while the murmuring of the Master Beryl mounted as it gained speed again, "but know you, Sarkas, that its muzzle points at the Master Beryl, always!"

NOW the forms of Earth were appearing on the Beryl. Men in countless hordes were maneuvering in myriads, legions and armies, across the face of the globe. There was no marching, but an effortless, swift as light almost, aerial maneuvering. For each human being possessed the tight-fitting metalized cloth, with the gleaming helmet in whose skull-pan was the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid, which was the "outside" garment of earthlings. With the Ovoid sitting exactly against the skull, man had but to will himself in any direction, at any livable height, and the action took place. In the same way, one man, to whom others in an organization gave allegiance by appointment, could will all his underlings into whatever formation he desired.

As beautiful and effortless as the flight of those birds which had vanished from the earth centuries before.

"Remember, Dalis," said Sarka, "that while the speed of the Earth in its orbit is between eighteen and nineteen miles per second, once thrown out of its orbit, and forced to follow a straight or nearly straight line, the speed may be many times that—or much less!"

"The simplest facts of science," snarled Dalis, "were known to me a thousand years before you were born! Now I shall tell the Spokesmen of the Gens, and be sure that you second what I say!"

He paused. Then, raising his voice impressively, he spoke.

"O Spokesmen of the Gens, O Gens of Earth, hark ye to the words of Dalis and of Sarka! The time has come to try the experiment of which Sarka told you, and which I, Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, have found good, and hereby certify! See that all your Beryls are mathematically tuned to catch every sound, every vibration, every picture, from this Beryl of Sarka, henceforth to be known as the Master Beryl!

"NO matter what happens, no matter what changes take place in the temperature of your homes, no matter what storms may come, touch not your Beryls until instructed from this laboratory! Tune your Beryls, then leave them, and hasten faster with your preparations for war! Each Spokesman of a Gens will at once instruct the members of his Gens that all partitions between families shall immediately be removed, outward from a common center in each case, until one hundred families occupy a single dwelling place. Materials from destroyed partitions shall be carefully hoarded, and the newer and bigger areas shall become maneuvering places for the hundred families which will occupy each given area!

"Facing a crisis as we are, no thought can be given to privacy, and neighborly quarrels must be forgotten! This move is necessary because no single dwelling place is large enough to be used as a place of maneuver—and from now on, until the command is given, maneuvers must not be held Outside! For hark ye, O Spokesmen, O Gens of Earth, we are about to start upon our voyage into outer space! Spokesmen, call in your maneuvering myriads! You have five minutes!"

In five minutes not a flying man could be seen in all the cold, stormy outside. Dalis spoke again.

"Tune your Beryls and remove partitions, taking care that in reducing partitions you so estimate your stresses and strains that the roof of the world be not endangered by weight that is unsupported, or improperly supported!

"Food Conservers, redouble your production and rush your transportation of Food Capsules!

"Mother of men, take over the labors of your sons and your husbands! Sisters and sweethearts of men, join the

myriads in maneuvers, for you, too, may require knowledge of fighting!"

IN spite of himself, an ejaculation of admiration escaped the lips of Sarka. Hearing it, Dalis turned to him, and a flush of pleasure tinged his cheeks as Sarka shaped one word with his lips:

"Excellent!"

Then, after a pause, Sarka spoke directly to the Gens of Earth.

"Take heed of the words of Dalis, for they are also the words of the Sarkas!"

Then an expression of surprise flashed across the face of Sarka as Dalis' fingers began to move in a swift sort of pantomime—for the sign manual he used was the secret manual of Jaska and Sarka! His heart cold within him at this new proof of her betrayal, Sarka nevertheless noted the words which dropped silently off the fingers of this enemy of the Sarkas.

"You are wise to resist no further! Together we can do much, and if you give your word not to oppose me, we can work together; but I will be the master!"

"But, if we grant you the mastery, will you heed our advice if it is good?"

"I will, but I alone will be the judge of its worth!"

"Then we work together henceforth. Let us begin! In the time required to move from here to the Moon, our people will have ample opportunity to perfect themselves in maneuvers! Are you ready, O my father, and father's father?"

"Ready!" they said together.

BUT for a moment Dalis hesitated. "Your word!" he snapped, looking at each Sarka in turn, and each in his turn nodded. They had given their word, but not their love, to Dalis. Dalis bowed low to Sarka the Youngest, who darted to the onyx base in which revolved the Master Beryl, and pressed a small lever of metalized jade, set in a slot on the southern side of the base of onyx. The humming sound within the Beryl became perceptibly louder, and as the minutes passed, and Sarka stood, arms folded, watching the Revolving Beryl, it continued to increase.

Here was the crisis, and as they watched its sure, certain approach, they forgot their enmities, Dalis and the Sarkas, and watched the whirling Beryl. Minute by minute its humming increased. The figures still were plain to be seen within the Beryl, but were becoming blurred of outline. Partitions had been removed all over the earth, increasing the size of rooms a hundredfold, reducing their number a hundredfold. The Gens of Earth, by hundred-families, were maneuvering under the Heads of Hundreds. The depths of the Master Beryl, therefore, was a maze of flying men, with their extremities slightly blurred, and becoming more so as the Master Beryl increased its speed.

HERE now was shown the value of the organization fostered by Sarka the First—for in all the world there was no single Beryl out of tune with the Master Beryl; and as the Master Beryl increased the speed of its revolving, so increased at the same time the speed of all the other Beryls. Minute by minute the humming of the Master, and with it the others, increased in volume.

"Father!" spoke Sarka. "To the Observatory, behind the Beryl, please, to watch the stars, and from them to note the direction we take when the combined vibrations of the Beryls have affected the quiescence of Earth's deposits of Ovidum and, through its shifting, disturbed the flight of the Earth in its orbit!"

With a brief nod Sarka's father hurried around the Master Beryl to the tiny Observatory beyond, from which, through the Micro-Telescopes, those who knew could read the secrets of the planets, the stars—the Universe. Sarka watched him go, wondering if Dalis might not forbid him. But Dalis mere-

ly watched him go and said nothing.

NOW that the time of Change was upon the world, Dalis realized his responsibility. It was little wonder that he began to be for the first time a little bit afraid.

"Note, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, and Dalis started nervously as his name was spoken. "Feel the trembling of the laboratory, just as the same trembling affects all the other buildings in the world in which Beryls are located. As the minutes pass the trembling will go deeper and deeper, and by to-morrow the first tremors will be reaching into the Earth to several miles below the last habitable Inner Level! And then. . .

"Then," repeated Sarka tersely, "my father will know by his study of the stars in which new direction we are traveling! For within twenty-four hours the Earth will have started on its voyage of conquest!"

"Is there no way, Sarka," queried Dalis, "by which we can control the direction of our flight!"

"There *is* a way, O wise and gallant Dalis! But since you do not know it, who now is master?"

Dalis' face became as pale as chalk, and Sarka smiled a little as he watched him. Then, wondering what new resolve stirred the depths of this master egotist of the earth, he watched emotions flash to and fro across the face of Dalis, watched the color return to his cheeks. The cold of death gripped at his heart when Dalis spoke.

"I do not fear death, O wise and gallant Sarka!" he mocked. "For I have lived fully and well, and for many, many centuries! You know that I do not fear to slay people of the Earth, for did I not propose to your father's father that a flood would be beneficial to unfit earthlings? Hear, then! Keep your secret, and I shall allow the Earth to go outward into space, out of control, in whatever direction it will. If any other worlds happen to lie in our pathway. . . ."

DALIS shrugged indifferently, turning his back on Sarka, to peer again into the depths of the Master Beryl, whose voice had risen to a vaster murmur, whose pictures were becoming moment by moment more blurred as time fled irrevocably into eternity.

Sarka the First took advantage of his opportunity, and leaped at the back of Dalis, hands extended to fasten them in the throat of his ancient enemy. Dalis whirled, with a burst of laughter, and the muzzle of his Ray Director covered the person of the First Sarka. In a flash the spot where Sarka the First had been was vacant, and there was no single sign to show that he had ever stood there!

Silence then in the laboratory, save for the mounting murmur of the Master Beryl!

CHAPTER VII

Outer Space

"HE only proved a belief I have entertained for centuries!" snarled Dalis. "That all the male Sarkas are fools—and the females for bearing them!"

Sarka said nothing, but within his breast a deep hatred was forming for Dalis. He had disliked him before, and had been amused by him; but in the busy life of Sarka there had been no time for hatred of anyone. Busy people had no time for hatreds.

"You should be torn to pieces for that, Dalis!" was all he said. "We needed my father's father in our efforts! But the loss to the world of one super-genius cannot be balanced by slaying another—so *you* are safe!"

"What he could do, I can do!" snapped Dalis.

Sarka turned away from him, seating himself beside the table of the varicolored lights, and his heart was heavy as lead in his breast. He blamed Jaska for much of this, and his heart was burdened, despite her treachery, by the fact that he loved her, always would

love her. Love was the one possession which made centuries of life desirable to men of the Earth. For men could spend centuries in seeking a true mate, knowing that there were other centuries still in which to enjoy her. Woman was man's greatest boon, his excuse for living, as was man excuse for woman. Through the centuries, when humankind remained forever young, the joy in each other of those truly mated grew as their knowledge grew. . . .

AND now Jaska had failed Sarka, when for half a century they had loved each other! Why had she done it? He had given her no reason to do so. Had there been some other reason? Why had she laughed, and left them, after the betrayal of the Master Beryl into the hands of Dalis?

"Before God," whispered Sarka, "I believe that you, Jaska, were playing a game to dupe Dalis, as he played a game to dupe us!"

Down in his heart he was not sure. But somehow, just to whisper to himself his faith in Jaska, gave it back to him in some measure, and by so much lightened the weight upon his heart. For now his responsibilities were greater than they had ever been before, and he had need of all his faculties.

"She'll come back, or somehow communicate with me, and explain everything," he told himself. But he refused to ponder on how Dalis the betrayer had gained possession of the secret sign manual he had believed known only to Jaska and himself. That, too, might be explained satisfactorily, for Dalis was cunning.

From the side of the laboratory opposite the Revolving Beryl came a soft tinkling sound, like the striking of a musical bell. Sarka rose wearily, strode to the wall, where a narrow aperture opened, in which rested Food Capsules sufficient for one meal for three men. He smiled wryly. They knew then, the Food Conservers, deep in the earth as they were, that Sarka the First was no more—and sent food for three men! All the world knew, perhaps, yet no single person had raised voice in protest—or if any had, the mounting murmur of the Beryls had drowned it out.

"SARKA!" spoke Dalis suddenly. "At what time do you estimate that the flight of the Earth in its orbit will be materially affected?"

"It is being affected this moment, Dalis, shifting the Ovidum store!" said Sarka shortly. "Within twelve hours we will be in readiness to start our journey!"

Remaining absolutely motionless within the domed laboratory, it was now possible to feel the ever so slight motion, not only of the laboratory, but of the mountain crest upon which it rested. Not so much a to-and-fro motion as a round-about motion.

Just as the slightest sound flies outward through space endlessly, and the slightest vibration moves outward until the end of time and of space, Sarka knew that the vibration set up by the Beryls, slight though it was, was already being felt at the Poles of the Earth. Not enough to be noticed there, but existant, just the same.

"In twelve hours the world will be fighting against this combined vibration and Anti-Gravitational Force we are starting, and second by second accelerating," Sarka explained to Dalis; "fighting to remain on its pathway about the Sun! But we will win against it, and with each new vibration, each succeeding one being more strongly felt, we will force the Earth that much more against the *pull* which holds it in its orbit!"

The laboratory was trembling. The mountain beneath it was trembling. Both in accordance with scientific design. There was no element of chance in it, for the mountain moved, and the laboratory on its crest moved, as science willed. It was now difficult for Sarka to remain still where he sat, for the trembling was exciting his heart action, and causing the blood to rush

to his cheeks, making him feverish. He rose to his feet and began pacing the floor.

He strode to the jade lever, moved it ahead a fraction of a fraction of an inch, and perceptibly the murmuring of the Beryl increased, as did the trembling of the laboratory and of the mountain.

TWELVE hours later exactly, Sarka shouted a single word to Dalis.

"Now!"

The laboratory was swinging about in a sort of circle in a way that made one dizzy if one remained still for the merest second. Sarka, glancing out into the Outside, across which blew the storms of the heights, and noting that no cracks appeared in the surface of the world's vast roof, knew that this swaying motion had been transmitted evenly to all the Earth, and that, so far at least, his calculations had been correct.

But Dalis was in a cold sweat of fear, and deathly sick. The motion of the laboratory, like the inside of a whirling top, made him ill, though Sarka could tell that he fought against it with all his great will.

Sarka strode to him, looked him in the eyes for a moment. Dalis looked back, glaring defiance.

"Are you afraid, Dalis?" he shouted, to be heard above the screaming of the Master Beryl.

"I am not afraid," croaked Dalis. "Has the time arrived?"

Sarka paused, as though for dramatic effect, and raised his right hand high, while his left hand dropped to the metalized jade lever. There still was room in the slot in the onyx base for the lever to move forward ever so little.

"WE have reached the exact place," cried Sarka, "where the Earth can, by pressure upon this lever, be continued on in its orbit—or forced out of it—out into space! Which shall it be, Dalis? If I move the lever forward we start our voyage, and may not be able to return!"

For a moment the nostrils of Dalis quivered as though with fear. His face was white with his illness; but out of his eyes peered the fanatic self-confidence of the man.

"Push it forward, O Sarka!" he managed.

Sarka, smiling slightly, pushed the lever to its uttermost limit, still with his right arm upraised. For full five minutes he stood thus, and then. . . .

"Now!" he shouted, bringing down his arm. "We have begun our journey into space! Come, let us look Outside, and await the first reports from my father!"

The two men, forgetting again for a moment the fact of their enmity, strode to the southern wall of the laboratory and looked out across the roof of the world.

"You will note, Dalis," said Sarka conversationally, "that in a matter of hours, the roaring of the Etheric winds will possess everything! We will have passed into the infinite reaches of Outer Space, where, if I may make so bold as to say so, it were better if Dalis, self-named master of the world, knew whither he was going!"

CHAPTER VIII

Moon Minions Prepare

"IT is time," said Sarka softly, "that we who have urged the world to forget its quarrels should forget our own. What difference who is master, so long as success attend our efforts?"

"Then tell me your secret of control of our flight!" snapped Dalis.

Before Sarka could answer, however, Sarka the Second entered the laboratory area before the Master Beryl. He looked a question at his son, and Sarka knew that his father was asking what had become of Sarka the First. He shrugged his shoulders, and nodded his head toward Dalis. Sarka the Second gave no more sign of perturbation than had his son, but deep within his eyes

were signal fires of fury which centuries of penance on the part of Dalis would not erase. But now, with Sarka the First gone, Dalis must live.

"We are headed," said Sarka's father softly, "in the general direction of the Moon! If we could travel toward it in a straight line, we would reach it, if we kept our pace of about eighteen miles per second, in approximately four hours! But since we are out of control, I fear we will pass it too far away for our fighters to fly across the intervening space! Or we may be drawn against it, in planetary collision, which of course means annihilation. We are traveling noticeably faster than while in the earth's orbit. I am able to see something of the preparation of Moon-men to receive us!"

DALIS turned to Sarka, and the perspiration bedewed his forehead. In order to make this mad mission successful, he must know Sarka's secret of control. Had he been in Sarka's place, *he* would have kept his secret, no matter what happened, and he believed in his heart that Sarka would do the same. It never occurred to him that Sarka, no matter who the master, would divulge his secret in order to save humanity from destruction.

"We have approximately four hours, Dalis!" Sarka prompted the betrayer. "I need at least an hour for my experiments! Do you, knowing as you do that I have planned all this out, know exactly what course our voyage should take, still insist on holding the reins yourself?"

"I agree, for this time, to listen to your advice, as I promised you!"

"Then let me suggest that you do some of the work which I had planned should be done by my father's father! It is time that the world's Induction Conduits be placed in operation, in order that our people be supplied with equable temperature from the Earth's Core, as our temperature changes due to our position with relation to the sun! Stand back and give me the controls!"

FOR a moment Dalis stared at the two Sarkas. Would they seize power the moment he moved away from the Beryl Control? In their places he knew he would have done it. In their places he knew he would never have submerged self in the good of the people. But, somewhat diffidently, he moved away. Sarka the Second returned to the Observatory, behind the Beryl, while Sarka stopped before the table where the lights were.

After a moment of thought-conversation with Sarka the Second in the Observatory, he dimmed the light which connected his laboratory with the headquarters of Klaser, in the Americas.

"Klaser," he barked, "for the period of one second cut the speed of every Beryl within your Gens to half its present speed!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the voice of Klaser.

"Have we changed direction?" Sarka mentally questioned his father.

"Slightly, but we are curving away, instead of toward the Moon! Try again!"

Sarka dimmed the light of Cleric, who instantly made answer.

"I am here, Sarka!"

"Stop the Beryls of your Gens for two seconds, but be prepared to speed them up immediately afterward, if ordered, to the speed at which they are now revolving! Klaser, hold the speed of your Beryls as they are!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the musical tones of Cleric.

"I hear, O Sarka!" replied Klaser.

"Now, my father," queried Sarka again, telepathically, "what direction do we travel?"

"We are heading in a direction which will cause us to pass the Moon at a distance of approximately fifty thousand miles!"

"From which point our fighters can reach the Moon in exactly two hours, after they have passed through our atmosphere!" cried Sarka exultantly, aloud.

"True, son!" replied Sarka the Sec-

ond, mentally. "I suggest you hold our course steady as it is!"

THE motion of the earth now was as that of a steadily falling body, and the shifting of the Ovidum store caused by vibrations set up by the Beryls had set the Earth on its course toward the Moon. Sarka now gave instructions to Klaser and to Cleric to return the speed of their Beryls to that which they had attained at the moment the journey of the Earth had begun—thus bringing them once more into harmony with the Master Beryl, and rendering the Ovidum static.

Dalis re-entered the laboratory from the Wall Tube, near the Dome Exit, by which he had passed down to the lowest Inner Level, and stared suspiciously at the two Sarkas. He found them half-smiling their satisfaction.

"We pass the Moon within fifty thousand miles!" exulted Sarka. "A flight of two hours for the Gens which attacks the Moon! Do you refuse, O Dalis, to send your Gens against the Moon?"

"Why not send the Gens of Gerd!" demanded Dalis. "He is the youngest of the Spokesmen, and what better test is there for him than this?"

"It is because he is so young that we do not wish to send him," replied Sarka coldly. "The colonization of the Moon by Earthlings requires the guiding genius of a Spokesman who has the experience of a Dalis—or a Sarka, else you would now be dead!"

"Then let it be a Sarka!" barked Dalis.

"Who, then, will control the further flight of the Earth?"

"You! Let your father lead my Gens against the Moon!"

"What will your Gens say, O Dalis? That their revered Spokesman feared to lead them in person?"

"Enough of this squabbling," snapped Sarka the Second. "Do you not realize that within a matter of hours, *some* Gens must be sent into battle? Come with me to the Observatory, where you will be given something beside squabbling with which to occupy your minds!"

LEAVING the earth on its lonely flight through space, the three men hurried to the Observatory, where they seated themselves before the eye-pieces of the Micro-Telescopes, whose outer circles had been aimed at the Moon.

For a moment the three stared breathlessly at the surface of this dead sister of the Earth. They noted her valleys, her craters which seemed bottomless, and saw that even as they watched, valleys and craters became sharper of outline, proving that they were approaching the Moon at a tremendous speed. It seemed, too, as though they were heading toward sure collision, though Sarka the Second had said that they would pass the Moon at a distance of fifty thousand miles.

"You will note activity at the very rims of the craters!" said the Elder Sarka easily. "The craters are man-made, not volcanic, as some scientists believe, and are shaped to converge the rays of the sun, as our roof is created for the same purpose. But note the activity at the rims of the craters!"

CLOSER the men peered, studying the rims as instructed by Sarka the Second. All about them—and as they watched, activity became apparent on the inner slopes of the craters—winged creatures seemed to be flying. They looked like tiny oblate spheroids, and they were in swift action, darting to and fro like bees which have been disturbed in their hives.

"Those spheres are of metal," said Sarka the Second, "and they are the fighting Aircars of the Moon-men!"

Neither Dalis nor Sarka denied this statement, for they knew it to be fact. It became apparent that the movement of the Aircars was not a movement of chance, but as skillfully ordered as any maneuvers which had, during the last few hours, been executed by any of the

Gens of Earth. That they were of metal became apparent when, through the Micro-Telescopes, the watchers caught the glint of the sun on the surfaces of the cars.

Sarka did a swift mental calculation, and announced the result.

"Those Aircars average something like four hundred feet in length, and are doubtless filled with fighting Moon-men!"

"That's right," said Dalis, who also had been calculating this very thing, "but our Ray directors will disintegrate the Aircars as easily as my Ray Director distintegrated Sarka the First!"

THE remaining Sarkas received this statement in silence, for Dalis' choice of a comparison had been an unhappy one, to say the least.

"I am wondering," said Sarka, "if you, my father, and you Dalis, have noted the peculiar appendages of the Aircars?"

"I saw them some minutes ago," said his father moodily, "and I am almost afraid to guess their use! If they are what I fear they are, then the Moon-men have been expecting this attack of ours for years and years, and have been preparing for it! If they have known, and have been preparing, then we are facing a race of super-Beings indeed—for we have known but little of their activities!"

"What, then," said Dalis, "do you think is the purpose of those appendages?"

"Those appendages, cilia, flagella, call them whatever you wish, are man-made tentacles, created for the purpose of seizing, crushing and destroying—then discarding. . ."

For a full two minutes the three men sat there, and horrible doubts flooded their brains. For the conclusion was obvious. The Gens of Earth would go into action flying, not as organizations, inside an Aircar, but as individuals, in swarms, myriads, legions and hordes. In order to do the utmost damage with their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators, they must approach within a reasonable distance—and the picture of those mighty tenacles, hurled like leashed lightning bolts into the midst of the attackers, folding in individuals by scores and hundreds, crushing them and dropping them contemptuously, was horrible in the extreme to contemplate!

IT was difficult to estimate the possible speed of the Aircars of the Moon-men, at least at this distance. Besides, perhaps not a single one of them was traveling at top speed, because of the fact of their crowded traffic.

This thought passed through the minds of the three men.

"But we'll know," said Sarka dully, "when they get into action. For if I am not mistaken, those Aircars are being mustered on the rims of those craters to await orders, not to resist our attack, but to launch their own attack before we are ready! Dalis, are you going to allow your Gens to go into action against these Outsiders, without the inspiration of your personal leadership?"

The nostrils of Dalis were quivering with the intensity of his emotion. His vast egotism told him that he, Dalis, could successfully combat these Aircars of the Moon-men, and he wished with all his heart to issue the orders to his Gens. But, vain as he was, he did not even wish to have the appearance of acceding to the original plan of Sarka! Sarka had planned for Dalis to attack the dwellers of the Moon, and Dalis had refused. Now, when this challenge of the Aircars was a direct challenge to his genius as a potential warlord of earth, and he wished to accept the challenge, he was torn two ways.

Should he go ahead, under the common leadership of the Sarkas? Or should he still refuse battle—and perhaps see some lesser Spokesman go forth to win glory and imperishable renown to himself?

A THOUGHT message, a command almost, impinged on the brains of the three.

"I wish to speak with you aloud!" The message was from Jaska!

The three men rose and darted into the room of the Master Beryl. They had no sooner entered than the clear voice of Jaska sounded in the laboratory.

"Sarka, I am no traitor! I am Jaska, who loves you! I am in the headquarters of Dalis at Ohi, and the Gens of Dalis has indicated its allegiance to me, having been informed by me that it is the wish of Dalis, whose presence is needed at the place of the Master Beryl! Command us, O Sarka, for we are ready to attack!"

There the voice ended, while the two Sarkas turned again to face Dalis.

Sarka now was glad that Dalis knew the secret sign manual, and his fingers worked swiftly as he spoke to the rebel.

"Will you, then, Dalis, allow your Gens to be led to glory by a woman? A woman, moreover, who has duped you?"

"The woman is a fool!" said Dalis. "She will lead the Gens to destruction!"

"Who, then, will be blamed if she does? Your Gens believe she is their new Spokesman at your wish! If they are told otherwise, they will think that Dalis himself is afraid to lead them!"

"We shall see," said Dalis, "if I could win honor by leading my Gens in a successful attack against the Moon-men, how much greater will be my glory if Jaska attacks, is repulsed —and I go in to turn defeat into victory!"

Thus spake the colossal selfishness of Dalis, who took no thought of the possible, nay, certain, loss of countless lives because of his obstinancy.

"I suggest," he said, "that you instruct your beloved Jaska to make ready; for if I am not mistaken, when we return to the Observatory we will discover that the Aircars of the Moon-men have left their craters and are racing outward from the Moon to meet us! Or perhaps *you* would lead my Gens, to safeguard Jaska!"

CHAPTER IX

The Attack of the Yellow Stars

"WHY should I safeguard Jaska?" asked Sarka quietly. "She is a true daughter of Cleric! If Cleric does not fear for her to be Spokesman of a Gens, why should I? He is her father. If she wins, the more glory will be hers! If she loses, she will at least have tried!"

"Meaning," snarled Dalis, "that I have refused even to try!"

Sarka shrugged expressively, and the three stepped once more into the Observatory, took their places before the Micro-Telescopes. For a moment they could not see the outline of the Moon, for during their brief sojourn in the laboratory the Moon seemed to have disintegrated, flying into countless spheroidal pieces.

"You see?" said Dalis. "The Moon-men do not wait for us! They attack!"

It was all too true that the Aircars which had been mustered at the rims of the Moon's craters had been hurled outward into space, outward toward the on-rushing Earth, and the myriad numbers of them for a time shut out all view of the surface of the Moon.

"God!" spoke Sarka, and it was like a prayer. His cheeks were pale as death, for in a moment he would speak the word which would send the Gens of Dalis, under the leadership of Jaska, out against these formidable Aircars of the Moon-men, and the appearance of the on-rushing cars was terrifying. That their flying radius, outward, was a great one, was manifest by the fact that the Earth would not for another hour reach its closest estimated point with the Moon.

SARKA, exchanging glances with his father, rose and stepped again into the laboratory. Even as he en-

tered the room of the Master Beryl, Jaska's broken signal came through.

"I am ready, Sarka!" came her soft voice, vibrant with confidence. "The Gens is ready, and the Gens believes in me!"

For a moment Sarka hesitated before taking the plunge. Then he spoke the fatal words.

"Go, Jaska, and my love goes with you!"

As the Earth approached closer to the Moon, the revolving of the Beryls had been decreased, so that the motion of the Master Beryl was almost normal—normal being that speed with which it revolved when it was necessary to use it visual contact with the people of the Earth.

Out of the area of the Gens of Dalis darted the green specks which were the flying people of Dalis! Sarka, staring in among them, focussing the Beryl-microscope, sought for some way of identifying Jaska, who led them. A thrill coursed through him when he made her out, unmistakably—dressed still in the tight white clothing of her own Gens, with the Red Lily of the house of Cleric on her breast and on her back! The daughter of Cleric was leading the Gens of Dalis into combat, under her own colors and her father's insignia!

SARKA raced back to the Observatory, seated himself again to watch the attack, which must of necessity be joined within a matter almost of minutes. Those myriads of Aircars, flying outward from the Moon, had seemed invincible; but up until now he had never seen an entire Gens mustered at one time. His whole being thrilled with the awesome grandeur of the spectacle; it seemed that not an able-bodied individual of the Gens of Dalis had failed to answer the muster of the Gens.

Millions upon millions of people, taking off the icy roof of that part of the Earth lying between Ohi and the North Pole, from the heart of what had once been part of the Pacific Ocean.

So many of them were there that when they were free of the Earth, flashing outward at two thousand miles an hour, it was impossible to see the Moon or those formidable Aircars—and still, out of the heart of the area of the Gens of Dalis, came other myriads, each flight waiting only for the preceding flight to clear!

The green, tight fitting clothing of the Gens of Dalis, each individual wearing the yellow star of the Spokesman of the Gens! A marvelous, awe-inspiring sight!

And this was but a single area, and the earth was divided into twelve such areas, some smaller, none larger, which showed Sarka for the first time a hint of the mighty man-power, and fighting woman-power which he controlled. However, once free of the Earth, conduct of the fight would be in the hands of the Spokesman—Jaska, acting for Dalis.

SARKA turned to Dalis, his eyes flashing.

"Does it not thrill you, O Dalis?" he demanded. "Do you not wish now that you had gone out with your people as their leader?"

"They follow Jaska like sheep," he stated with a snort. "But wait! My Gens seem invincible, because it bulks between us and the Aircars of the Moon Dwellers! Wait, see how the battle goes! The Gens may yet have need of Dalis!"

Sarka studied those outgoing hosts, which were dwindling away to more specks with vast speed, for through the cordons and cordons of them he could now see the Aircars more plainly. It was still possible, when one looked through the Micro-Telescopes, to see the slim figure of Jaska, leading the attack. She was in the vanguard of the Gens of Dalis, leading her people onward as though she had been born to command—utterly fearless.

"And I was small enough," whis-

pered Sarka, "to doubt you! I even told you that I doubted you! Forgive me, Jaska! Forgive me!"

And still, as Level after Level gave up its myriads, the Gens of Dalis shot forth from the Gens area, and winged away, following the lead of Jaska. Millions of people, armed with Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators. How tiny the individuals seemed, against the mighty bulk of those Aircars of the Moon!

But Sarka did not fear, save for the safety of Jaska, as he was realizing anew that he had scarcely skimmed the surface of the man-might of the Earth.

NOW, seen through the myriads of the Dalis Gens, he could see again the onrushing Aircars, and his heart misgave him for a moment as he could tell, by estimation, that at least a hundred families were outlined against each individual car, which moment by moment grew larger.

Those tentacles were now much in evidence, rising and falling under and around the racing Aircars like serpents, or dragging ropes; but seeming like living things in the sentient manner of their moving—eager to come in contact with the first of the earthlings, and to wrap those tentacles about them, crush them, hurl them into space.

Sarka went back into the laboratory only long enough to attune the Beryls of the Earth to a point where the Earth would remain almost stationary, comparatively speaking, taking a curving course about the surface of the Moon, as it had for countless millions of years coursed about the Sun.

Then, back to the Observatory, to see how went the battle. Through the Micro-Telescopes the first meeting was plain to be seen. The Gens of Dalis rushed headlong to meet the Aircars, and many of them rushed headlong to their destruction.

Sarka noted a group of perhaps a hundred people break forth from the vanguard of the attackers, and mount to a safe height above the Aircars against which the Gens were hurling themselves. A sigh of relief escaped him, and he wished there were some way in which he could learn the individual identities of the ninety and nine who had taken Jaska forcibly out of danger! For her white clothing, and her Red Lily of Cleric were plainly visible and recognizable! The men of the Gens of Dalis might permit the leadership of a woman, but they would not permit her to be needlessly endangered.

SARKA turned to Dalis, and noted that the face of the master egotist was pale and drawn, his nostrils quivering with emotion, as he watched his Gens go into battle, and a feeling of satisfaction coursed through Sarka like a little white flame. Dalis was proud of his Gens, and now was wishing that he, and not Jaska, were leading them onward.

"I would wager something," whispered Sarka to himself, "that Dalis will not be able to stand it! That before battle has been joined for ten minutes, he will have gone out to take over the leadership of the Gens! Jaska must have guessed that, too! Wise, clever Jaska!"

With a fearless massing of forces, the people of the yellow stars joined battle with the Aircars! The manner of men who flew the Aircars was still unknown to the people of Earth.

But in a trice they would know.

In a matter of minutes Earth would realize the horror of what faced the Gens of Dalis, whom Jaska led!

For with the sending out of their Aircars, the Moon-men had given but the merest hint of their ponderous, devastating might!

CHAPTER X

Tentacles of Terror

DALIS had always been a stormy petrel, but as he sat before his Micro-Telescope, watching his Gens go into battle against the Moon-men, not

even Sarka the Second guessed the depth of infamy of which Dalis was capable.

Dalis had given a hint, but Sarka had, in his sudden realization of the fact that Jaska really loved him, and was no traitor, forgotten that hint. How had Dalis learned the secret sign-manual of Jaska and Sarka? Therein lay the hint.

Dalis, in common with all other Earth's scientists, possessed the ability to think deeply, yet to so mask his thoughts that no one else could grasp them telepathically—and it was well for the peace of mind of the Sarkas that they could not read the black thought of the man, or look into the future, even so far as a dozen years.

The Gens of the yellow stars moved into contact with the Aircars of the Moon. Earth and Moon were gripped in the horror of war, the war between worlds, where no quarter might be asked or given, because fought between alien peoples who did not so much as comprehend each other's languages, or even their signals.

The people of the Gens swarmed about the Aircars like myriad swarms of angry bees, but it was only to Dalis that this simile came, for only Dalis, of these three, had ever seen a swarm of bees.

SWEEPING in closely, the Gens brought forth from their resting places in their Sarka-Belts their Ray Directors and their Atom-Disintegrators, and turned the blighting rays of them against the gleaming, ice-colored sides of the aerial monsters.

But even as the Gens brought their instruments of destruction into play, the mighty tentacles of the first hundred Aircars had got into action. Down they whirled to catch at the flying bodies of the pigmylike individuals of the Gens, and hundreds of Earthlings were caught in those tentacles in the first moment of conflict.

Sarka studied the reaction of the people thus captured. He could see the expressions of unutterable agony on their faces, could see their cheeks turn black with—what? There was no way of knowing; but all sorts of guesses were possible. Those tentacles, from their action upon the human beings which they encompassed, might be charged with electricity. For the people they captured turned black, then shriveled slowly—and were released by the tentacles.

They fell sluggishly away, through the great space which yet separated the Earth and the Moon. But the people who fell, fell aimlessly, going neither toward the Earth or the Moon, like black feathers in a vagrant breeze.

"Great God, do you see, father?" cried Sarka. "The—whatever it is—that turns our people into cinders and drops them, has no effect on the Anti-Gravitational Ovoids in the skull-pans of the helmets, and without mental direction, the Ovoids neither rise nor fall, but wander aimlessly!

"See? As the fight continues, those who still live, as they dart here and there through the battle area, will be confronted continually by the blackened faces and shriveled figures of their departed friends, relatives and neighbors, and will see at first hand what will happen to themselves if the are caught by the tentacles!"

FROM the lips of Dalis came one single burst of laughter, filled with bitterness. No other word came from his lips, no other sign. He merely sat and stared, and masked his hell-black thoughts so that neither of the Sarkas might read them. But in the fertile mind of Dalis a plan was being born—a plan that, he knew, had always been growing back in his mental depths, somewhere, down the centuries, since first he had become an enemy of the Sarkas. The Sarkas ruled the Earth, and. . . .

But he would spring his surprise when he believed the time right, for Dalis possessed a faculty which neither of the Sarkas possessed—an example

of it being his incomprehensible knowledge of the secret code of moving fingers used by Sarka and Jaska.

The Gens of Dalis drew back in consternation at this wholesale taking off of the first line of attack. Out of that first line, comprising perhaps a thousand families, scarcely a hundred had escaped the groping of those mighty tentacles of the Aircars—and the black, shriveled things which had been men floated all about the Aircars which had destroyed them, warnings to those who followed them into the fray. Those who had somehow escaped the wrath of the tentacles in the first engagement fled back into the heart of the next line of sky-skirmishers, fear and horror in their faces.

Here, answering to the will of Jaska, a mile or so above the heart of the conflict, they reformed with their people, and prepared again to attack. But how to attack these formidable Aircars successfully?

THAT was the question. Ray Directors had been turned against them, but something was decidedly wrong. The first car to feel the blast of even one of those Ray Directors should have vanished, become as nothing, as had the body of Sarka the First before the Ray Director of Dalis.

But apparently nothing had happened. Why?

Grimly Dalis and the two remaining Sarkas pondered the problem, wondering at the same time what Jaska would now do, how reform her Gens, how send it again to an attack that seemed hopeless.

"There they go again!" whispered Sarka.

The first two myriads of the Gens of Dalis had now crowded together until they formed a veritable cloud which masked, for a moment, the Aircars of the Moon. Then, as one person, answering to the will of Jaska, they swept in to the attack again.

But as they approached the Aircars, they divided four ways—up, down, to right and to left, and smashed into the Aircars from four directions at once. Jaska, knowing that countless lives must be lost to destroy these monsters of the Moon, was trying to down them by mass attack, hoping that, while the inner groups gave their lives, those who followed after them would get in close enough to use their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators.

"She is wasting lives to no avail!" cried Dalis. "There is a way to beat these people!"

"It is really your responsibility, O Dalis!" snapped Sarka. "Why do you not go out and lead your Gens? If you know, why remain here and watch the destruction of all the people of your Gens?"

"You know why our Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators do not work, or work but poorly? Because our fighters are within the gravitational pull of the Moon, instead of the Earth, and machines which work perfectly on Earth are thrown out of balance when under the influence of the Moon!"

"Then," cried Sarka, "we must sweep in close enough to our people. . . ."

WITHOUT waiting to say another word, for thousands of men were dying each breath-space, Sarka raced into the laboratory and gave the signal to race up the speed of the Beryls, to attune them with the increasing speed of the Master Beryl, whose jade lever now was set at the halfway mark in the onyx slot.

When he returned to the Observatory, Dalis was gone, and Sarka the Second sat alone.

"I knew he would go," said Sarka, "for he cannot endure to see someone else take credit for winning this first victory—if it is even possible to win it! I knew that, vain though he is, Dalis is yet a man!"

"I am not so sure of that, son!" replied the Elder Sarka. "For I have known him longer than you have! There's something else in that brain of his which takes no thought of the

death of people of his Gens—or for the betterment of the other people of the Earth! I wonder. ."

But even as he spoke, Dalis was away, flying free and fast toward the scene of battle. In a few minutes his will would be felt by his Gens, and Jaska could return again. Sarka sought for her. She was still safe, high above the battle. Thousands and thousands of those shriveled things now floated in the space about the cars, above them, below them, everywhere. But the Gens of Dalis had at last caused some trouble to the Aircars of the Moon.

A hundred of them, like stricken birds, were falling downward toward the Moon, great holes torn in their sides. But as they fell, their tentacles, which whipped here and there like snakes in their death-throes, carried with them their full capacity in people of the Gens of Dalis!

WITH the partial destruction of the Aircars which were falling, the force that actuated the death-dealing of those tentacles seemed to have gone out of them. For the people now held in the grip of the mighty tentacles were still alive! Their squirmings could be plainly seen, and their cries could have been heard, had it not been that the noise of battle drowned out all other sounds.

A hundred Aircars falling, and the men and fighting women of the Gens of Dalis, with new courage in them now they realized that the Aircars were not entirely invincible, renewed the attack with savage vigor.

Taking no thought of the death which must surely come to them, they circled and pressed the Aircars; and when the tentacles caught at some of them, others climbed to the very body of the Aircars, over the shriveling bodies of the dying, and turned their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators against the gray sides of the monsters.

Even before Dalis had reached the vanguard of his Gens another hundred Aircars were falling, each with its tentacles wrapped tightly about such of the earthlings as they could grasp. Falling . . falling still living, plunging down.

Now Dalis had reached the scene of the fray, and was assuming command.

As he did so a single white-robed figure, life-size when seen through the Micro-Telescopes, darted out of the fray and headed at top speed for the dwelling place of Sarka. Jaska, relieved, was returning home!

But though Jaska flew at top speed, she did not seem to grow larger, or draw nearer to the Earth!

OUT of the ruck of the defenders of the Moon, a single Aircar, whose gleaming gray side was marked with queer crimson splashes, broke free to pursue Jaska!

She fled at top speed, yet the Aircar was gaining, proof that the Moon had developed speed greater than Earth had attained.

"But why," queried Sarka, "does she draw no nearer?"

"Great God!" ejaculated Sarka the Second, after a brief examination of certain chartographs beside his Micro-Telescope. "We are moving away from the Moon! Something is forcing us away! The people of the Moon have something whose nature we do not know, capable of forcing them away from us—while they pull our people toward them! You see? If they pulled us toward them, we could overthrow them, for we outnumber them perhaps thousands to one; but if they force themselves away faster than the Gens of Dalis if defeated can follow us they can destroy, or capture, the Gens at their leisure!"

SUDDENLY, out of the Earth, past the all-seeing eyes of the Micro-Telescopes, swept a new myriad. Men in white, wearing the Red Lily of the House of Cleric! Cleric was sending out men to rescue Jaska from the Aircar which pursued her! But would

Jaska or these who went forth to fetch her ever be able again to attain landing place upon the Earth!

It looked doubtful.

Even as Sarka asked himself this question fresh Aircars shot from the rims of Moon craters, rushing outward to add their weight in the battle against the Gens of Dalis. The Gens of Dalis was doomed!

In the mind of Sarka the Second there still loomed a hellish doubt that would not down.

The men of Cleric were surrounding Jaska now, protecting her with their lives against the tentacles of that lone Aircar splashed with crimson—and all were flying a losing race with the Earth, which was still being forced outward from the Moon!

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An Exciting Interplanetary Story

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EARTH, THE MARAUDER

Part Two of the Thrilling Novel

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THE FLYING CITY

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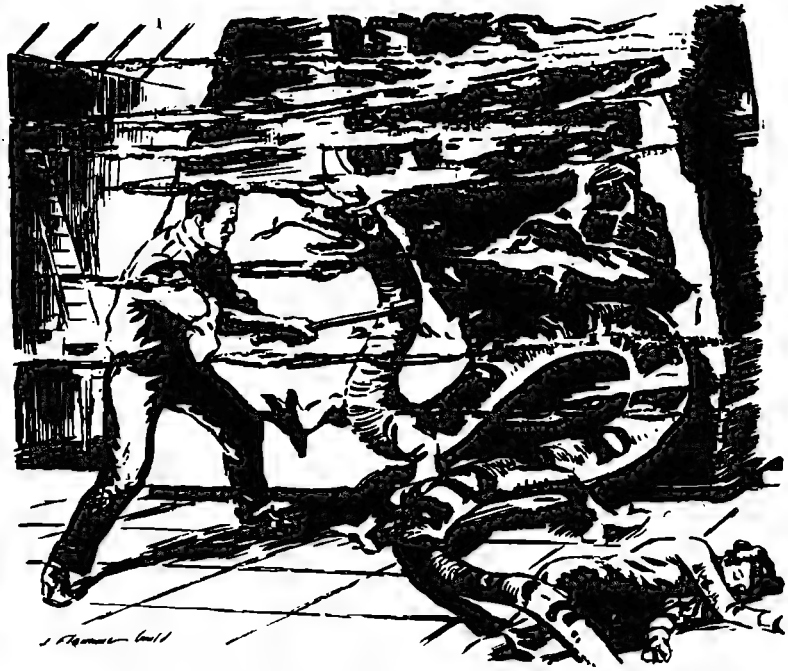

Marable, in a desperate frenzy, hacked at the reptile's awful head.

From An Amber Block

By Tom Curry

"THESE should prove especially valuable and interesting, without a doubt, Marable," said the tall, slightly stooped man. He waved a long hand toward the masses of yellow brown which filled the floor of the spacious workrooms, towering almost to the skylights, high above their heads.

"Is that coal in the biggest one with the dark center?" asked an attractive young woman who stood beside the elder of the men.

"I am inclined to believe it will prove to be some sort of black liquid," said Marable, a big man of thirty-five.

There were other people about the immense rooms, the laboratories of the famous Museum of Natural History. Light streamed in from the skylights and windows; fossils of all kinds, some immense in size, were distributed about. Skilled specialists were chipping away at matrices other artists were reconstructing, doing a thousand things necessary to the work.

A giant amber block at last gives up its living, ravenous prey.

A hum of low talking, accompanied by the irregular tapping of chisels on

stone, came to their ears, though they took no heed of this, since they worked here day after day, and it was but the usual sound of the paleontologists' laboratory.

Marable threw back his blond head. He glanced again toward the dark haired, blue eyed young woman, but when he caught her eye, he looked away and spoke to her father, Professor Young.

"I think that big one will turn out to be the largest single piece of amber ever mined," he said. "There were many difficulties in getting it out, for the workmen seemed afraid of it, did not want to handle it for some silly reason or other."

PROFESSOR YOUNG, curator, was an expert in his line, but young Marable had charge of these particular fossil blocks, the amber being pure because it was mixed with lignite. The particular block which held the interest of the three was a huge yellow brown mass of irregular shape. Vaguely, through the outer shell of impure amber, could be seen the heart of ink. The chunk weighed many tons, and its crate had just been removed by some workmen and was being taken away, piece by piece.

The three gazed at the immense mass, which filled the greater part of one end of the laboratory and towered almost to the skylights. It was a small mountain, compared to the size of the room, and in this case the mountain had come to man.

"Miss Betty, I think we had better begin by drawing a rough sketch of the block," said Marable.

Betty Young, daughter of the curator, nodded. She was working as assistant and secretary to Marable.

"Well—what do you think of them?"

The voice behind them caused them to turn, and they looked into the face of Andrew Leffler, the millionaire paleontologist, whose wealth and interest in the museum had made it possible for the institution to acquire the amber.

LEFFLER, a keen, quick moving little man, whose chin was decorated with a white Van Dyke beard, was very proud of the new acquisition.

"Everybody is talking about the big one," he continued, putting his hand on Marable's shoulder. "Orling is coming to see, and many others. As I told you, the workmen who handled it feared the big one. There were rumors about some unknown devil which lay hidden in the inklike substance, caught there like the proverbial fly in the amber. Well, let us hope there is something good in there, something that will make worth while all our effort."

Leffler wandered away, to speak to others who inspected the amber blocks.

"Superstition is curious, isn't it?" said Marable. "How can anyone think that a fossil creature, penned in such a cell for thousands and thousands of years, could do any harm?"

Professor Young shrugged. "It is just as you say. Superstition is not reasonable. These amber blocks were mined in the Manchurian lignite deposits by Chinese coolies under Japanese masters. They believe anything, the coolies. I remember working once with a crew of them that thought—"

The professor stopped suddenly, for his daughter had uttered a little cry of alarm. He felt her hand upon his arm, and turned toward her.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

She was pointing toward the biggest amber block; and her eyes were wide open and showed she had seen something, or imagined that she had seen something, that frightened her.

PROFESSOR YOUNG followed the direction of her finger. He saw that she was staring at the black heart of the amber block; but when he looked he could see nothing but the vague, irregular outline of the inky substance.

"What is it, dear?" asked Young again.

"I—I thought I saw it looking out, eyes that stared at us—"

The girl broke off, laughed shortly, and added, "I suppose it was Mr. Leffler's talking. There's nothing there now."

"Probably the Manchurian devil shows itself only to you," said her father jokingly. "Well, be careful, dear. If it takes a notion to jump out at you, call me and I'll exorcise it for you."

Betty blushed and laughed again. She looked at Marable, expecting to see a smile of derision on the young man's face, but his expression was grave.

The light from above was diminishing; outside sounded the roar of homegoing traffic.

"Well, we must go home," said Professor Young. "There's a hard and interesting day ahead of us to-morrow, and I want to read Orling's new work on matrices before we begin chipping at the amber."

Young turned on his heel and strode toward the locker at the end of the room where he kept his coat and hat. Betty, about to follow him, was aware of a hand on her arm, and she turned to find Marable staring at her.

"I saw them, too," he whispered. "Could it have been just imagination? Was it some refraction of the light?"

THE girl paled. "I—I don't know," she replied, in a low voice. "I thought I saw two terrible eyes glaring at me from the inky heart. But when father laughed at me, I was ashamed of myself and thought it was just my fancy."

"The center is liquid, I'm sure," said Marable. "We will find that out soon enough, when we get started."

"Anyway, you must be careful, and so must father," declared the girl.

She looked at the block again, as it towered there above them, as though she expected it to open and the monster of the coolies' imagination leap out.

"Come along, Betty," called her father.

She realized then that Marable was holding her hand. She pulled away and went to join her father.

It was slow work, chipping away the matrix. Only a bit at a time could be cut into, for they came upon many insects imbedded in the amber. These small creatures proved intensely interesting to the paleontologists, for some were new to science and had to be carefully preserved for study later on.

Marable and her father labored all day. Betty, aiding them, was obviously nervous. She kept begging her father to take care, and finally, when he stopped work and asked her what ailed her, she could not tell him.

"Be careful," she said, again and again.

HER father realized that she was afraid of the amber block, and he poked fun at her ceaselessly. Marable said nothing.

"It's getting much softer, now the outside shell is pierced," said Young, late in the day.

"Yes," said Marable, pausing in his work of chipping away a portion of matrix. "Soon we will strike the heart, and then we will find out whether we are right about it being liquid. We must make some preparations for catching it, if it proves to be so."

The light was fading. Outside, it was cold, but the laboratories were well heated by steam. Close by where they worked was a radiator, so that they had been kept warm all day.

Most of the workers in the room were making ready to leave. Young and Marable, loath to leave such interesting material, put down their chisels last of all. Throughout the day various scientific visitors had interrupted them to inspect the immense amber block, and hear the history of it.

All day, Betty Young had stared fascinatedly at the inky center.

"I think it must have been imagination," she whispered to Marable, when Young had gone to don his coat and hat. "I saw nothing to-day."

"Nor did I," confessed Marable. "But I thought I heard dull scrapings inside the block. My brain tells me I'm an imaginative fool, that nothing could be alive inside there, but just the same, I keep thinking about those eyes we thought we saw. It shows how far the imagination will take one."

"It's getting dark, Betty," said her father. "Better not stay here in the shadows or the devil will get you. I wonder if it will be Chinese or up-to-date American!"

THE girl laughed, said good night to Marable, and followed her father from the laboratory. As they crossed the threshold a stout, red-faced man in a gray uniform, a watchman's clock hanging at his side, raised his hat and smiled at the young woman and her father.

"Hello, Rooney," cried Betty.

"How d'ye do, Miss Young! Stayin' late this evenin'?"

"No, we're leaving now, Rooney. Good night."

"G' night, Miss Young. Sleep happy."

"Thanks, Rooney."

The old night watchman was a jolly fellow, and everybody liked him. He was very fond of Betty, and the young women always passed a pleasant word with him.

Rooney entered the room where the amber blocks were. The girl walked with her father down the long corridor. She heard Marable's step behind them.

"Wait for me a moment, father," she said.

She went back, smiling at Marable as she passed him, and entered the door, but remained in the portal and called to Rooney, who was down the laboratory.

He came hurrying to her side at her nervous hail.

"What is it, ma'am?" asked Rooney.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Rooney?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I'm always careful. Nobody can get in to harm anything while Rooney's about."

"I don't mean that. I want you to be careful yourself, when you're in this room to-night."

"Why, miss, what is there to be wary of? Nothin' but some funny lookin' stones, far as I can see."

THE young woman was embarrassed by her own impalpable fears, and she took leave of Rooney and rejoined her father, determined to overcome them and dismiss them from her mind.

All the way home and during their evening meal and afterwards, Professor Young poked fun at Betty. She took it good-naturedly, and laughed to see her father in such fine humor. Professor Young was a widower, and Betty was housekeeper in their flat; though a maid did the cooking for them and cleaned the rooms, the young woman planned the meals and saw to it that everything was homelike for them.

After a pleasant evening together, reading, and discussing the new additions to the collection, they went to bed.

Betty Young slept fitfully. She was harassed by dreams, dreams of huge eyes that came closer and closer to her, that at last seemed to engulf her.

She awakened finally from a nap, and started up in her bed. The sun was up, but the clock on the bureau said it was only seven o'clock, too early to arise for the day's work. But then the sound of the telephone bell ringing in the hall caused her to get up and don her slippers and dressing gown and hurry out into the living room.

BEFORE she reached the phone, however, she heard her father's voice answering.

"Hello. . Yes, speaking. Good morning, Smythe."

Smythe was the janitor of the museum. Betty, standing behind her father, wondered what he could want that he should phone so early in the morning. Her father's next words sent a thrill of fright through her heart.

"My God! I—I can't believe it!" cried Young. "Is he dead?"

There was a pause; Betty caught the sound of the excited Smythe's tones through the receiver.

"Who—who is it?" she whispered, clasping her parent's arm.

"I'll be right down, yes."

Young hung up, turned to his daughter. His face was sad, heavily lined with shadows of sorrow.

"Dear, there's been a tragedy at the museum during the night. Poor Rooney has been murdered—at least so they believe—and Smythe, who found him, wants me to come down and see if anything has been stolen. I must go at once. The body is in our laboratory."

"Rooney? Ah, poor fellow."

The girl wept a little, but braced herself to assist her father.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No, no. You'd better remain here; you can come along later," said Young. "I don't like to have you see such sights, dear. It wouldn't be good for you."

"I'll be all right. I promise you I will."

She insisted and he was forced to let her accompany him to the museum. They hailed a cab and were soon at the door. The elevator took them to the top floor, and swiftly they passed along the corridors and came to the portal which led into the rooms where the amber blocks were.

SMYTHE greeted them, a worried look on his seamed face. "I've sent for an ambulance, Professor," he said.

Young nodded, brushed past him, and entered the laboratory. In the morning light the amber blocks had taken on a reddish tinge. Now, they seemed to oppress the young woman, who had bravely remained at her father's side as he walked quickly to the base of the biggest block.

A vague shape lay in the shadows between the wall and the largest amber mass. Professor Young bent over the body of Rooney, and felt the pulse.

"He's been dead some time," he said.

She nodded, stricken to the heart by this terrible end of her old friend Rooney.

"There's nothing we can do for him, now," went on her father soberly. "It looks as though he had been set upon and stabbed time after time by his assailant or assailants, whoever they were."

"How—how pale he is," said Betty. "Poor Rooney was so jolly and red-faced, but his skin is like chalk."

"And he's shrunken, too. It seems there's no blood left in his veins," said her father.

MARABLE, who had been called also, came in then and aided in the examination. He said good morning to Betty and her father, and then went to bend over Rooney's body.

"See the look of abject terror on his face," Betty heard Marable say to her father as the two examined the corpse. "He must have been very much afraid of whoever killed him."

"They beat him up frightfully," said Young. "There must have been several of the assassins; it would take more than one man to do such damage."

"Yes. His ribs are crushed in—see, this gash, Professor, would be enough to cause death without any of the other wounds."

Betty Young could not take her eyes from the ghastly sight. She steeled herself to bear it, and prayed for strength that she should not faint and cause her father trouble. She could see the two men examining a large blistered area under the corpse's armpit, in the center of which was a sharp vertical slit which had without doubt punctured the artery near the surface of the axilla. Perhaps it had pierced even to the heart.

"Bloodless," exclaimed Marable, noticing the same thing as her father had spoken of. "It is as if the blood had been pumped out of his body!"

"Yes, I think it has drained out."

"There is not much of a pool here

where he lies, though," said Marable, in a low voice. "See, there are only splotches about, from various cuts he received."

"Maybe he was dragged here from another room," said Young. "When the others come, we will soon know if anything is missing. It seems that men desperate enough to commit such a murder would not leave without trying to get what they came after. Unless, of course, the killing of Rooney frightened them away before they could get their booty."

SMYTHE approached the group, with a physician in tow. The latter confirmed the facts which Marable and Young had found: that Rooney had been killed by the deep gash near the heart and that most of the blood was drained from the body.

"They seem like the slashes from an extremely sharp and large razor," said the medical man.

Others were coming in to look at Rooney, and the museum was buzzing with activity as various curators, alarmed about the safety of their valuable collections, feverishly examined their charges.

"He punched his clock in here at two A.M.," said Smythe. "I seen that. It's the last time he'll ever do his duty, poor feller."

"Curious odor," said the doctor, sniffing. "It smells like musk, but is fetid. I suppose it's some chemical you use."

"I noticed that, too," said Professor Young. "I don't recognize it, myself."

Marable, who had been looking at the floor between the great block of amber and the body, uttered an exclamation which caused the two men to look up.

"There are wavy lines leading around back of the block," said Marable, in answer to their questions.

The young man disappeared behind the block, and then he called to them excitedly to join him. Betty Young pressed closer, and finally slipped past the corpse and stood by her father.

BEFORE her, she saw a large pool of black liquid. It had been hidden by the corner of the block, so that they had not noticed it, so busy were they looking at Rooney.

And there was a great cavity in the heart of the amber block. Pieces of the yellow brown mass lay about, as though they had fallen off and allowed the inky substance to escape.

"It's hardened or dried out in the air," said Young.

"It looks like black lacquer," said Betty.

The musky smell was stronger here. The great amber block seemed to stifle them with its size.

"Our chipping and hammering and the heat of the radiator causing it to expand must have forced out the sepia, or whatever it is," said Young. There was a disappointed note in his voice. "I had hoped that inside the liquid we would discover a fossil of value," he went on.

Marable looked at Betty Young. They stared at one another for some seconds, and both knew that the same thought had occurred to the other. The frightful eyes—had they then been but figments of the imagination?

Marable began looking around carefully, here and there. Betty realized what he was doing, and she was frightened. She went to his side. "Oh, be careful," she whispered.

"The giant block has been moved a little," he replied, looking into her pretty face. "Have you noticed that?"

Now that she was told to look, she could see the extremely heavy amber block was no longer in the position it had been in. Marks on the floor showed where it had been dragged or shifted from its original resting place.

BETTY YOUNG gasped. What force could be so powerful that it could even budge so many tons? A derrick had been used, and rollers placed under the block when men had moved it.

Reason tried to assert itself. "It—it

must have exploded. That would cause it to shift," she said faintly.

Marable shrugged. His examination was interrupted by the arrival of the museum's chemist, sent for by Young. The chemist took a sample of the black liquid for analysis. Reports were coming in from all over the museum, different departments declaring, one after another, that nothing had been disturbed or stolen from their sections.

Betty Young went again to Marable's side. She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw long, clawlike marks on the floor, radiating from the sepia.

"Doctor Marable," she said, "please don't—don't look any longer. Leave this terrible place for the day, anyway, until we see what happens in the next twenty-four hours."

He smiled and shook his head. "I must make a search," he replied. "My brain calls me a fool, but just the same, I'm worried."

"Do you really think. . ?"

He nodded, divining her thought. The girl shivered. She felt terror mounting to her heart, and the matter-of-fact attitudes of the others in the great laboratory did not allay her fears.

Rooney's body was removed. The place was cleaned up by workmen, and Marable's search—if that was what his constant roving about the laboratory could be called—ceased for a time. The chemist's report came in. The black liquid was some sort of animal secretion, melonotic probably.

IN spite of the fact that they had learned so many facts about the murder, they as yet had not solved the mystery. Who had murdered Rooney, and why? And where had his blood gone to? In no other rooms could be found any traces of a struggle.

"If you won't do anything else, please carry a gun," begged Betty of Marable. "I'm going to try to take father home, right after lunch, if he'll go. He's so stubborn, I can't make him take care. I've got to watch him and stay beside him."

"Very well," replied Marable. "I'll get a revolver. Not that I think it would be of much use, if I did find—" He broke off, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

Leffler came storming into the room. "What's this I hear?" he cried, approaching Marable. "A watchman killed in the night? Carelessness, man, carelessness! The authorities here are absurd! They hold priceless treasures and allow thieves to enter and wreak their will. You, Marable, what's all this mean?"

Leffler was angry. Marable looked into his red face coolly. "We do the best we can, Mr. Leffler," he said. "It is unlikely that anyone would wish to steal such a thing as that block of amber."

He waved toward the giant mass.

Leffler made a gesture of impatience. "It cost me many thousands of dollars," he cried.

"It is time for lunch, Professor," said Betty.

Marable bowed to Leffler and left the millionaire sputtering away, inspecting the various specimens he had contributed.

The one o'clock gong had struck, and all the workers and investigators were leaving in paleontological laboratories for a bite to eat.

MARABLE, with Betty, went out last. Leffler was over in one corner of the room, hidden from their sight by a corner of an amber block. They could hear Leffler still uttering complaints about the carelessness of the men in charge of that section of the museum, and Marable smiled at Betty sadly.

"Poor Rooney," he said. "Betty, I feel more or less responsible, in a way."

"No, no," cried the girl. "How could you have foreseen such a thing?"

Marable shook his head. "Those eyes, you know. I should have taken precautions. But I had no idea it could burst from its prison so."

For the first time Marable had defi-

nitely mentioned his idea of what had occurred. The girl had understood it all along, from their broken conversation and from the look in the young scientist's eyes.

She sighed deeply. "You will get a revolver before you search further?" she said. "I'm going to. Smythe has one, and I know he'll lend it to me."

"I will," he promised. "You know, Leffler has the same idea we have, I think. That's why he keeps talking about it being our fault. I believe he has seen something, too. His talk about the devil inside the block was half in earnest. I suppose he put it down to imagination, or perhaps he did not think this fossil to be dangerous."

They went out together, and walked toward the restaurant they frequented. Her father was there, lunching with one of the superintendents of the museum. He smiled and waved to Betty.

Everyone, of course, was discussing the killing of Rooney.

AFTER an hour, during which the two young people spoke little, Marable and Betty Young left the restaurant and started back toward the museum. Her father was still at his table.

They walked up the driveway entrance, and then Marable uttered an exclamation. "Something's wrong," he said.

There was a small crowd of people collected on the steps. The outer doors, instead of being open as usual, were closed and guards stood peering out.

Marable and Betty were admitted, after they had pushed their way to the doors.

"Museum's closed to the public, sir," replied a guard to Marable's question.

"Why?" asked Marable.

"Somethin's happened up in the paleontological laboratories," answered the guard. "Dunno just what, but orders come to clear the rooms and not let anybody in but members of the staff, sir."

Marable hurried forward. Betty was at his heels. "Please get yourself a gun," she said, clutching his arm and holding him back.

"All right. I'll borrow one from a guard."

He returned to the front doors, and came back, slipping a large pistol into his side pocket.

"I want you to wait here," he said.

"No. I'm going with you."

"Please," he said. "As your superior, I order you to remain downstairs."

The girl shrugged. She allowed him to climb the stairs to the first floor, and then she hurried back in search of Smythe.

SMYTHE obtained a gun for her, and as she did not wish to wait for the slow elevator, she ran up the steps. Smythe could not tell her definitely what had occurred in the upper laboratory that had caused the museum to be closed for the day.

Her heart beating swiftly, Betty Young hurried up the second flight of stairs to the third floor. A workman, whom the girl recognized as a manual laborer in the paleontological rooms, came running down, passing her in full flight, a look of abject terror on his face.

"What is it?" she cried.

He was so frightened he could not talk logically. "There was a black fog —I saw a red snake with legs—"

She waited for no more. A pang of fear for the safety of Marable shot through her heart, and she forced herself on to the top floor.

Up there was a haze faintly black, which filled the corridors. As Betty Young drew closer to the door of the paleontological laboratories, the mist grew more opaque. It was as though a sooty fog permeated the air, and the girl could see it was pouring from the door of the laboratory in heavy coils. And her nostrils caught the strange odor of fetid musk.

She was greatly frightened; but she gripped the gun and pushed on.

THEN to her ears came the sound of a scream, the terrible scream of a mortally wounded man. Instinctively she knew it was not Marable, but she feared for the young professor, and with an answering cry she rushed into the smoky atmosphere of the outer laboratories.

"Walter!" she called.

But evidently he did not hear her, for no reply came. Or was it that something had happened to him?

She paused on the threshold of the big room where were the amber blocks.

About the vast floor space stood the numerous masses of stone and amber, some covered with immense canvas shrouds which made them look like ghost hillocks in the dimness. Betty Young stood, gasping in fright, clutching the pistol in her hand, trying to catch the sounds of men in that chamber of horror.

She heard, then, a faint whimpering, and then noises which she identified in her mind as something being dragged along the marble flooring. A muffled scream, weak, reached her ears, and as she took a step forward, silence came.

She listened longer, but now the sunlight coming through the window to make murky patches in the opaque black fog was her chief sensation.

"Walter!" she called.

"Go back, Betty, go back!"

The mist seemed to muffle voices as well as obscure the vision. She advanced farther into the laboratory, trying to locate Marable. Bravely the girl pushed toward the biggest amber block. It was here that she felt instinctively that she would find the source of danger.

"Leffler!" she heard Marable say almost at her elbow, and the young man groaned. The girl came upon him, bending over something on the floor.

SHE knelt beside him, gripping his arm. Now she could see the outline of Leffler's body at her feet. The wealthy collector was doubled up on the ground, shrivelled as had been Rooney. His feet, moving as though by reflex action, patted the floor from time to time, making a curious clicking sound as the buttons of his gray spats struck the marble.

But it was obvious, even in the murky light, that Leffler was dead, that he had been sucked dry of blood.

Betty Young screamed. She could not help it. The black fog choked her and she gasped for breath. Leaving Marable, she ran toward the windows to throw them open.

The first one she tried was heavy, and she smashed the glass with the butt of the gun. She broke several panes in two of the windows, and the mist rolled out from the laboratory.

She started to return to the side of Marable. He uttered a sudden shout, and she hurried back to where she had left him, stumbling over Leffler's body, recoiling at this touch of death.

Marable was not there, but she could hear him nearby.

Cool air was rushing in from the windows, and gradually the fog was disappearing. Betty Young saw Marable now, standing nearby, staring at the bulk of an amber block which was still covered by its canvas shroud. Though not as large as the prize exhibit, this block of amber was large and filled many yards of space.

"Betty, please go outside and call some of the men," begged Marable.

But he did not look at her, and she caught his fascinated stare. Following the direction of his gaze, the girl saw that a whisp of smoky mist was curling up from under the edge of the canvas cover.

"It is there," whispered Betty.

MARABLE had a knife which he had picked up from a bench, and with this he began quietly to cut the canvas case of the block, keeping several feet to each side of the spot where the fog showed from beneath the shroud.

Marable cut swiftly and efficiently, though the cloth was heavy and he was

forced to climb up several feet on the block to make his work effective. The girl watched, fascinated with horror and curiosity.

To their ears came a curious, sucking sound, and once a vague tentacle form showed from the bottom of the canvas.

At last Marable seized the edge of the cut he had made and, with a violent heave, sent the canvas flap flying over the big block.

Betty Young screamed. At last she had a sight of the terrible creature which her imagination had painted in loathing and horror. A flash of brilliant scarlet, dabbed with black patches, was her impression of the beast. A head flat and reptilian, long, tubular, with movable nostrils and antennae at the end, framed two eyes which were familiar enough to her, for they were the orbs which had stared from the inside of the amber block. She had dreamed of those eyes.

But the reptile moved like a flash of red light, though she knew its bulk was great; it sprayed forth black mist from the appendages at the end of its nose, and the crumpling of canvas reached her ears as the beast endeavored to conceal itself on the opposite side of the block.

MARABLE had run to the other side of the mass. The air, rushing in from the windows, had cleared the mist, in spite of the new clouds the creature had emitted, and Betty could see for some feet in either direction now.

She walked, with stiff, frozen muscles, around to join Marable. As she came near to him, she saw him jerking off the entire canvas cover of the block to expose the horrible reptile to the light of day.

And now the two stood staring at the awful sight. The creature had flattened itself into the crevices and irregular surfaces of the block, but it was too large to hide in anything but a huge space. They saw before them its great bulk, bright red skin blotched with black, which rose and fell with the breathing of the reptile. Its long, powerful tail, tapering off from the fat, loathsome body, was curled around the bottom of the block.

"That's where it's been hidden, under the shroud. We've been within a few feet of it every moment we've been at work," said Marable, his voice dry. "There were many hiding places for it, but it chose the best. It came out only when there was comparative quiet, to get its food. ."

"We—we must kill it," stammered the girl.

But she could not move. She was looking at the immense, cruel, lidless eyes, which balefully held her as a serpent paralyzes a bird. The tubular nostrils and antennae seemed to be sniffing at them, waving to and fro.

"See the white expanse of cornea, how large it is," whispered Marable. "The pupils are nothing but black slits now." The interest excited by this living fossil was almost enough to stifle the dread of the creature in the man.

But the girl saw the huge flat head and the crinkled tissue of the frilled mouth with its sucker disks.

SUDDENLY, from the central portion of the sucker-cup mouth issued a long, straight red fang.

The two drew back as the living fossil raised a short clawed leg.

"It has the thick body of an immense python and the clawed legs of a dinosaur," said Marable, speaking as though he were delivering a lecture. The sight, without doubt, fascinated him as a scientist. He almost forgot the danger.

"Oh, it's horrible," whispered the girl.

She clung to his arm. He went on talking. "It is some sort of terrestrial octopus. . . ."

To the girl, it seemed that the living fossil was endless in length. Coil after coil showed as the ripples passed along its body and the straight fang threatened them with destruction.

"See, it is armored," said Marable.

"Betty, no one has ever had such an experience as this, seen such a sight, and lived to tell of it. It must be ravenous with hunger, shut up in its amber cell inside the black fluid. I—"

A sharp, whistling hiss interrupted his speech. The reptile was puffing and swelling, and as it grew in bulk with the intake of the air, its enamel-like scales stood out like bosses on the great body. It spat forth a cloud of black, oily mist, and Marable came to himself at last.

He raised his revolver and fired at the creature, sending shot after shot from the heavy revolver into the head.

BETTY YOUNG screamed as the reptile reared up and made a movement toward them. Marable and the girl retreated swiftly, as the beast thumped to the floor with a thud and started at them, advancing with a queer, crawling movement.

It was between them and the door. Betty thrust her gun into Marable's hands, for his own was empty and he had hurled it at the monster.

"Hurry! Run for your life!" ordered Marable, placing himself between Betty and the reptile.

She would not leave him till he swerved to one side, going dangerously close to the beast and firing into its head. The rush of the flowing body stopped; it turned and pursued him, leaving the girl safe for the moment, but separated from Marable.

Luckily, on the smooth marble it could not get an efficient grip with its clawlike arms. It was clumsy in its gait, and for a time the man eluded it.

Betty Young, looking about for a weapon, calling for help at the top of her lungs, caught sight of a fireman's ax in a glass case on the wall. She ran over, smashed the glass with the small hammer, and took out the heavy ax.

Shot after shot reverberated through the big laboratory as Marable tried to stop the monster. Betty, bravely closing in from the rear, saw Marable leaping from side to side as the brute struck viciously at him time and again.

The creature had been emitting cloud after cloud of black fog, and the atmosphere, in spite of the open windows, was dim in its vicinity. Vaguely Betty heard shouts from the far hall, but all she could do was to call out in return and run toward the horror.

MARABLE, out of breath, had climbed to the top of an amber block. Betty, close by, saw the reptile rear its bulk up into the air, until it was high enough to strike the man.

Before it could send forth its death-dealing fang to pin Marable to the block, however, Betty Young brought the ax down on its back with all her strength.

There was a sickening thud as the sharp weapon sunk deep into the fleshy back. She struck again, and the creature fell in folds, like a collapsing spring. It lashed back at her, but she leaped clear as it slashed in agony, thrashing about so that the whole room seemed to rock.

Marable came scrambling down the side of the block to help her. He was breathing hard, and she turned toward him; as Betty looked away, a portion of the scarlet tail hit her in the body and she fell, striking her head on the floor.

Marable reached down, seized the ax, and in a desperate frenzy hacked at the reptile's awful head. He leaped in and out like a terrier, sinking the ax deep into the neck and head of the beast. He gave the impression of slashing at heavy rubber, and Betty Young, trying to drag herself away from that dangerous body, heard his whistling breath.

They were almost hidden from one another now, in the mist which came from the thing's nostrils.

"Help, help!" screamed the girl, mustering her last strength in the despairing cry.

She saw Marable go down, then, as the reptile hit him a glancing blow with its body. When the powerful

young fellow did not rise, the girl thought it was all over. The air really became black to her; she fainted and lay still.

WHEN Betty Young opened her eyes, the air had cleared greatly, and she could see the familiar outlines of the paleontological laboratory and the bulks of the amber blocks. Her father was holding her head in his lap, and was bathing her temples with water.

"Darling," he said, "are you badly hurt?"

"No," she murmured faintly. "I'm—I'm all right. But—but Walter—did it—"

"He's all right," said her father. "The reptile was dying, and could do him no damage. We finished it off."

Then, Marable, covered with blood, which he was trying to wipe from his hands and clothes, came and smiled down at her.

"Well," said Professor Young, "you two have mutilated a marvelous and unique specimen between you."

There were several men examining something nearby. Turning her eyes in their direction, Betty saw they were viewing the remains of the reptile.

MARABLE helped her to her feet, and stood with one arm about her. Professor Orling, the famous specialist on fossil reptiles, was speaking now, and the others listened.

"I think we will find it to be some sort of missing link between the dinosaurs and mososaurs. It is surely unbelievable that such a creature should be found alive; but perhaps it can be explained. It is related to the amphibians and was able to live in or out of the water. Now, we have many instances of reptiles such as lizards and toads penned up in solid rock but surviving for hundreds of years. Evidently this great reptile went through the same sort of experience. I would say that there has been some great upheaval of nature, that the reptile was caught in its prison of amber thousands and thousands of years ago. Through hibernation and perhaps a preservative drug it emitted in the black fluid, this creature has been able to survive its long imprisonment. Naturally, when it was released by the cutting away of part of the amber which penned it in, it burst its cell, ravenous with hunger. The fanglike tooth we see was its main weapon of attack, and it set upon the unfortunate watchman. After knocking him unconscious, its suckerlike fringe glued the mouth near the heart while the fang shot into the arteries and drew forth the body fluids. There is a great deal to be done with this valuable find, gentlemen. I would suggest that—"

MARABLE grunted. "Oh, hell," he murmured in Betty Young's ear. "To the devil with paleontology, Betty. You saved my life. Come out and let's get married. I love you."

The girl smiled up into his eyes. The scientists close by were listening fascinatedly to Orling's words, and had no time to watch the two young people, for they stared at the reptile's body as the great man went from section to section, lecturing upon one point after another.

"You've forgotten paleontology for a moment, thank goodness," said Betty. "I'm glad."

"Yes, Betty dear. This terrible experience has shaken me, and I realized how much I love you when I saw you in danger. What an awful few minutes! If I had to live them over again, I don't think I could face them."

"Never mind," she murmured. "We are safe, Walter. After all, it's not every woman who is helped by a living fossil to make the man she loves realize he loves her!"

The SF-22 and her convoy were surrounded by these unearthly rays.

The Terror of Air-Level Six

By Harl Vincent

IT was a sweltering evening in mid-August, during that unprecedented heat wave which broke Weather Bureau records in 2011. New York City had simmered under a blazing sun for more than three weeks, and all who were able had deserted the city for spots of lesser torridity. But I was one of those unfortunates who could not leave on account of the pressing urgency of business matters and, there being nothing else to do, kept doggedly at my work until it seemed that nerves and body must soon give way under the strain. To-night, as I boarded the pneumatic tube, I dropped into the nearest seat and could not even summon the energy to open my newspaper.

From some far reach of leagueless Space came a great pillar of flame to lay waste and terrorize the Earth.

For some minutes I sat as in a daze, wishing merely that the journey was over, and that I was on my own front porch out in Rutherford. After awhile I stirred and looked around. Seeing none of my acquaintances in the car, I finally opened the newspaper and was considerably startled by the screaming headlines that confronted me from its usually conservative first page:

SECOND COAST TRANSPORT PLANE LOST!
Disaster Like First in Air-Level Six!

No wonder the newsboys had been crying an extra on Broadway! I had given no heed to the import of their shoutings, but this was real news and well worthy of an extra edition. Since the mysterious loss of the SF-61, only four days previously, the facilities of the several air transportation systems were seriously handicapped on account of the shaken confidence of the general public. It was not surprising that there was widespread reluctance at trusting human lives and valuable merchandise to the mercies of the inexplicable power which had apparently wiped out of existence the SF-61, together with its twenty-eight passengers and the consignment of one-half million dollars in gold. And now the NY-18 had gone the way of the other!

Details were meager. Both ships had failed to reply to the regular ten-minute radio calls from headquarters and had not since been seen or heard from. In both cases the last call had been answered when the ship was proceeding at full speed on its regular course in air-level six. The SF-61 last reported from a position over Mora in New Mexico, and four days of intensive search by thousands of planes had failed to locate ship or passengers. Today, in the early hours of the morning, the NY-18 reported over Colorado Springs, on the northern route, and then, like the SF-61, dropped out of existence insofar as any attempts at communicating with or locating her were concerned. She, too, carried a heavy consignment of specie, though only eleven passengers had risked the westward journey.

SOMEONE had dropped into a seat at my side, and I looked up from my reading to meet the solemn eyes of Hartley Jones, a young friend whom I had not seen for several months.

"Why, hello, Hart," I greeted him. "Glad to see you, old man. Where in Sam Hill have you been keeping yourself?"

"Glad to see you, too, Jack," he returned warmly. "Been spending most of my time out at the hangar."

"Oh, that's right. You fellows built a new one at Newark Airport, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Got a great outfit there now, too. Why don't you drop around and see us one of these days?"

"I will, Hart, and I want you to take me up some time. You know I have never been in one of these new ships of yours. But what do you think of this mess?" I pointed to the black headlines.

He grinned joyously and flipped back the lapel of his coat, displaying a nickeled badge. "George and I are starting out to-night to look around a little," he gloated. "Just been appointed deputy air commissioners; and we got a couple of guns on our newest plane. Air Traffic Bureau thinks there's dirty work afoot. Twelve-motored planes don't disappear without leaving a trace. Anyhow, we've got a job, and we're going to try and find out what's wrong. How'd you like to come along?"

"What?" I replied. "You know darn well I'm too busy. Besides, I'd be no good to you. Just extra load, and not pay load at that. And then, I'm broke—as usual."

HARTLEY JONES grinned in his engaging way. "You'd be good company," he parried; "and, what's more, I think the trip would do you a lot of good. You look all shot to pieces."

"Forget it," I laughed. "It's just the heat. And I'll have to leave you here, Hart. Drop in and see us, will you? The wife was asking for you only yesterday."

"Jack, dear," my wife greeted me at the door of my modest suburban home, "Mr. Preston just called, and he wants you to call him right back."

"Oh, Lord," I groaned, "can't I forget the office for one evening?" Preston was manager of the concern for which I worked.

Nevertheless, though our two fine youngsters were clamoring for their dinner, I made the telephone call at once.

"Makely," came the voice of the boss, when the connection was completed, "I want you to take the night plane for Frisco. Hate to ask you, but it must be done. Townley is sick and someone has to take those Canadian Ex. bonds out to Farnsworth. You're the only one to do it, and after you get there, you can start on that vacation you need. Take a month if you wish."

The thought of Hartley Jones' offer flashed through my mind. "But have you read of the loss of the NY-18?" I asked Preston.

"I have, Makely. There'll be another hundred a month in your check, too, to make up for the worry of your family. But the government is sending thirty Secret Service men along on the SF-22, which leaves to-night. In addition, there will be a convoy of seven fighting planes, so there is not likely to be a repetition of the previous disasters."

That hundred a month sounded mighty good, for expenses had been mounting rapidly of late. "All right, Mr. Preston," I agreed, "I will be at the airport before midnight. But how about the bonds?"

"I'll drive around after dinner and deliver them to you. And thanks for your willingness, Makely. You'll not be sorry."

MY wife had listened intently and, from my words, she knew what to expect. Her face was a tragic mask when I replaced the receiver on its hook, and my heart sank at her expression.

Then there came the ring of the telephone and, for some reason, my pulse raced as I went to the hall to answer it. Hartley Jones' cheerful voice greeted me and he was positively gleeful when I told him of my projected trip.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "But you'll not take the SF-22. You'll take the trip with me as I wanted. I tell you what: You be out at Newark Airport at eleven-thirty, but come to my hangar instead of to that of the transportation company. We'll leave at the same time as the regular liner, and we'll get your old bonds to Frisco, regardless of what might happen to the big ship. Also we might learn something mighty interesting."

I argued with him, but to no avail. And the more I argued, the greater appeal was presented by his proposition. Finally there was nothing to do but agree.

PRESTON arrived with the bonds shortly after the children were tucked in their beds. I did not tell him of my change in plans. He did not stay long, and I could see that he was uncomfortable under the accusing eyes of Marie, for all his own confidence in the safety of the trip in the closely-guarded SF-22.

At precisely eleven-thirty I reached the great steel and glass hangar where Hart Jones and George Boehm carried on their experiments with super-modern types of aircraft. Hart Jones had inherited more than two million dollars, and was in a fair way to spend it all on his favorite hobby, though those who knew him best vowed that he would make many times that amount through royalties on his ever-growing number of valuable inventions.

The immense doors were open, and I gazed for the first time into the hangar whose spacious interior provided storage and manufacturing facilities for a dozen or more planes of Hart Jones' design. A curiously constructed example of his handiwork stood directly before me, and several mechanics were engaged in making it ready for flight. My friend advanced from their midst to meet me, a broad smile on his grease smeared countenance.

"Greetings, Jack," he said, taking my small bag from my hands. "Right on time, I see. And I can't tell you how glad I am that you are coming with us. So is George."

"Well, I didn't expect to," I admitted; "but there is no need of telling you that I had far rather be in your ship than in the big one."

GEORGE BOEHM, the same jolly chap I had several times met in Hart's company, but fatter than ever, crawled from beneath the shiny metal body of the plane and scrambled to his feet at my side.

"Going in for a bit of adventuring, Mr. Makely?" he asked, wiping his hand with a piece of cotton waste before extending it.

"Yes," I replied, as I squeezed his chubby fingers. "Can't stick in the mud all my life, George. And I wouldn't want to be in better company for my first attempt either."

"Nor we," he returned, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Rather have a greenhorn on the *Pioneer* than some government agent, who'd be butting in and trying to run everything. Think you'll be scared?"

"Probably," I admitted; "but I guess I can stand it."

"Hear the latest news broadcast?" interrupted Hart Jones.

"No. What was it?" I asked.

"There has been a report from out near Cripple Creek," said Hart solemnly, "that a pillar of fire was observed in the mountains shortly after the time the NY-18 last reported. The time and the location coincide with her probable position and the report was confirmed by no less than three of the natives of that locality. Of course the statements are probably extravagant, but they claim this pillar of fire extended for miles into the heavens and was accompanied by a tremendous roaring sound that ceased abruptly as the light of the flame disappeared, leaving nothing but blackness and awe-inspiring silence behind."

"LOT of bunk!" grunted George, who was vigorously scrubbing the back of his neck.

"Sounds like a fairy tale," I commented.

"Nevertheless, there may be something in it. In fact, there must be. Three of these mountaineers observed practically the same phenomenon from quite widely separated points, though one of them said there were three pillars of fire and that these looked more like the beams of powerful searchlights. All agreed on the terrific roar. And, after all, these two liners did disappear. There must be something quite out of the ordinary about the way in which they were captured or destroyed, and this occurrence may well be supposed to have a bearing on the matter."

"Possibly they were destroyed by some freak electrical storm," I suggested.

"Where then are the wrecked vessels?" asked Hart. "No, Jack, electrical storms do not destroy huge air liners and then suck them out into space beyond our vision. These two ships are no longer on the surface of the earth, else they would have been long since located. The magnetic direction finders of the transportation people have covered every inch of the United States, as well as Mexico and Canada."

"Of course they might have been carried halfway around the world by a wind of unprecedented velocity." I commenced a silly argument in favor of the theory that the elements had accounted for the two vessels, but was interrupted by the mounting roar of great engines throbbing overhead.

"Hurry up there, George!" shouted Hart. "It's the SF-22 coming in. We have to be ready for the take-off in five minutes!"

HE hastened to take George's place at the washbowl and all was activity within the confines of our hangar. George and I left the office and went out to the landing field, which

was now brilliant with the glare of floodlights. The *Pioneer* had been trundled into the open and stood ready for the flight. Not a hundred feet above the field, the huge silver moth that was the SF-22 swept by in a wide circle that would bring her into the wind. The roar of her engines died as she swung out of the circle of light into the surrounding darkness.

The crowds which had gathered to witness her landing buzzed with excited comment and speculation. Her nose brought slightly up, she dropped to a perfect three-point landing, the brakes screeching as she was brought to a standstill at the hanger of the transportation company.

"Come on now, you fellows," came the voice of Hart Jones from the hangar entrance, "there's no time to lose. The *Pioneer* takes off immediately after the big fellow."

We hurried to the waiting ship, which seemed like a tiny toy when compared with the giant SF-22. I had observed very little of the construction of the *Pioneer*, but I could now see that she was quite different in design from the ordinary plane. A monoplane she was, but the wing structure was abnormally short and of great thickness, and there were a number of tubes projecting from the leading edge that gave the appearance of a battery of small cannon. The body, like all planes designed for travel in air-level six, was cigar-shaped, and had hermetically sealed ports and entrance manholes. A cluster of the cannon-shaped tubes enclosed the tail just back of the fins and rudder and, behind the wing structure atop the curved upper surface of the body, there was a sphere of gleaming metal that was probably three feet in diameter.

BEFORE I could formulate questions regarding the unusual features of the design, we were within the *Pioneer's* cabin and Hart Jones was engaged in clamping the entrance manhole cover to its rubber seat. A throbbing roar that penetrated our double hull attracted my attention and, looking through a nearby porthole, I saw that the convoy of army planes had taken off and was circling over the SF-22 in anticipation of her start. Trim, speedy fighting ships these were, with heavy caliber machine-guns in turrets fore and aft and normally manned by crews of twelve each. The under surfaces of their bodies glistened smooth and sleek in the light from the field, for the landing gears had been drawn within and the openings sealed by the close-fitted armor plate that protected these ordinarily vulnerable portions when in flight.

The SF-22 was ready to take off and the crowds were drawing back into the obscurity beyond the huge circle of blinding light. One after another her twelve engines sputtered into life, and ponderously she moved over the field, gathering speed as the staccato barking of the exhausts gradually blended into a smooth though deafening purr. The tail of the great vessel came up, then the wheels, and she was off into the night.

HART JONES sat at a bewildering array of instruments that covered almost the entire forward partition of the cabin. He pressed a button and the starting motor whined for a moment. Then the single engine of the *Pioneer* coughed and roared. Slowly we taxied in the direction taken by the SF-22, whose lights were now vanishing in the darkness. I saw George open a valve on the wall and Hart stretched the fingers of his left hand to what appeared to be the keyboard of a typewriter set into the instrument board. He pressed several of the keys and pulled back his stick. There was a whistling scream from astern and I was thrown back in my seat with painful force. With that, the motor roared into full speed and we had left the airport far behind.

"What on earth?" I gasped.

"Rocket propulsion," laughed Hart.

"I should have warned you. Those tubes you saw outside at the tail and along the leading edge of the wings. Only used three of them, but that was sufficient for the take-off."

"But I thought this rocket business was not feasible on account of the wastage of fuel due to its low efficiency," I objected.

"We should worry about fuel," said Hart.

I looked about me and saw that there was very little space for the storage of this essential commodity. "Why?" I inquired. "What fuel do you use?"

"Make our own," he replied shortly. He was busy at the moment, maneuvering the *Pioneer* into a position above and behind the SF-22 and her convoy.

"You make your own fuel enroute?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes. That sphere you saw on top. It is the collecting end of an electrical system for extracting nitrogen and other elements from the air. This extraction goes on constantly while we are in the atmosphere and my fuel is an extremely powerful explosive of which nitrates are the base. The supply is replenished continuously, so we have no fear of running short even in the upper levels."

GEORGE had crawled through a small opening into some inaccessible region in the stern of the vessel. I pondered over what Hart had just told me, still keeping my eyes glued to the port, through which could be seen the fleet we were following. The altimeter registered thirty-five thousand feet. We were entering air-level six—the stratosphere! Below us the troposphere, divided into five levels, each of seven thousand feet, teemed with the life of the air. The regular lanes were filled with traffic, the lights of the speeding thousands of freight and pleasure craft moving in orderly procession along their prescribed routes.

Up here in the sixth level, which was entirely for high-speed traffic of commercial and government vessels making transcontinental or transoceanic voyages, we were the only adventurers in sight—we and the convoyed liner we were following. The speed indicator showed six hundred miles an hour, and the tiny spot of light that traveled over the chart to indicate our position showed that we were nearing Buffalo.

Glancing through one of the lower ports, I saw the lights of the city shining dimly through a light mist that fringed the shore of Lake Erie and extended northward along the Niagara. Then we were out over the lake, and the luminous haze was slipping rapidly behind. I looked ahead and saw that the distance to the SF-22 and her convoy had somewhat increased. We were a mile behind and some two thousand feet above them. Evidently Hart was figuring on keeping at a safe distance for observation of anything that might happen.

OUR motor was running smoothly and the angle of the propellor blades had been altered to take care of the change in air density from the lower altitudes. It flashed across my mind that this was an ideal location for an attack, if such was to be made on the SF-22.

Then, far ahead, I saw a beam of light stab through the darkness and strike the tossing surface of the lake. Another and another followed, and I could see that the SF-22 and her convoy were surrounded by these unearthly rays. They converged from high above to outline a brilliant circle where they met on the surface of the waters, and, in the midst of the cone formed by the beams, the liner and its seven tiny followers could be seen to falter and huddle more closely together.

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye—so quickly, in fact, that Hart and I had not the time to exchange remarks over the strange occurrence. For a moment the eight vessels hovered, halted suddenly by this inexplicable force from out the heavens. Then

there rose from the apex of the inverted cone of light a blinding column of blue-white radiance that poured skyward an instant and was gone. To our ears came a terrific roaring that could be likened to nothing we had heard on earth. The *Pioneer* was tossed and buffeted as by a cyclone, and George came tumbling from the opening he had entered, his round face grown solemn. Then came eery silence, for the *Pioneer's* motor had gone dead. Ahead there was utter darkness. The liner and her convoy had completely vanished and the *Pioneer* was slipping into a spin!

"WHAT'S up?" asked George of Hart, who was tugging frantically at the controls.

"The liner has gone the way of the first two," he replied; "and the yarn about the pillar of fire was not so far wrong after all."

"You saw the same thing?" asked George incredulously.

"Yes, and so did Jack. There came some beams of light from the sky; then the pillar of fire and the roaring you heard, after which the vessels were gone and our electrical system paralyzed."

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated George. "What to do now?"

As he spoke, the *Pioneer* came out of the spin, and we were able to resume our positions in the seats. None of us was strapped in, and we had been clinging to whatever was handiest to keep from being tossed about in the cabin. Hart wiped his forehead and growled out an oath. The instrument board was still illuminated, for its tiny lamps were supplied with current from the storage battery. But the main lights of the cabin and the ignition system refused to function. We were gliding now, but losing altitude rapidly, having already dropped to the lower limits of level five.

"Can't you use the rocket tubes?" I inquired hesitatingly.

"They are fired in the same manner as the motor," replied Hart; "but we might try an emergency connection from the storage battery, which is ordinarily used only in starting and for the panel lights."

GEORGE was already fussing with the connections in a small junction box, from which he had removed the cover. Meanwhile, the black waters of Lake Erie were rushing upward to meet us, and the needle of the altimeter registered twelve thousand feet.

"Here's the trouble!" shouted George, triumphantly holding up a small object he had removed from the junction box. "Ignition fuse is blown."

"Probably by some radiations from the cone of light and the column that destroyed the liner. Lucky we were no closer," were Hart's muttered comments.

George produced a spare fuse and inserted it in its proper place. The cabin lights glowed instantly and the motor started at once.

"Well, I'm going up after the generators of this mysterious force that is destroying our cross-country ships and killing our people," asserted Hart. "The rays came from high above, but the *Pioneer* can go as high as anything that ever flew—*higher*."

He snapped a switch and a beam of light that rivalled the so-called pillar of fire bored far into the night, dimming the stars by its brilliance. Again his fingers strayed to the rows of white keys and the rocket tubes shrieked in response to his pressure. This time I was prepared for the shock of acceleration, but the action was maintained for several seconds and I found the pressure against my back growing painful. Then it was relieved, and I glanced at the altimeter. Its needle had reached the end of the scale, which was graduated to eighty thousand feet!

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that we are more than sixteen miles in the air?"

"Nearly thirty," replied Hart, pointing to another dial which I had not

seen. This one was graduated in miles above sea level, and its needle wavered between the twenty-nine and thirty mark!

AGAIN Hart pressed the rocket buttons, and we shot still higher into the heavens. Thirty, forty, fifty miles registered the meter, and still we climbed.

"Great Scott!" blurted a voice I knew was my own, though I had no consciousness of willing the speech. "At this rate we'll reach the moon!"

"We could, if we wished," was Hart's astounding reply; "and I wish you wouldn't say too much about it when we return. We have oxygen to breathe and an air-tight vessel to retain it. With the fuel we are using, we could easily do it, provided a sufficient supply were available. However, the *Pioneer* does not have large enough storage tanks as yet, and, of course, we cannot now replenish our supply with sufficient rapidity, for the atmosphere has become very rare indeed—where we are. My ultimate object, though, in building the *Pioneer*, was to construct a vessel that is capable of a trip to the moon."

"You think you could reach a great enough velocity to escape the gravitational pull of the earth?" I asked, marveling more and more at the temerity and resourcefulness of my science-minded friend.

"Absolutely," he replied. "The speed required is less than seven miles a second, and I have calculated that the *Pioneer* can do no less than twenty."

Mentally I multiplied by sixty. I could hardly credit the result. Twelve hundred miles a minute!

"But, how about the acceleration?" I ventured. "Could the human body stand up under the strain?"

"That is the one problem remaining," he replied; "and I am now working on a method of neutralizing it. From the latest results of our experiments, George and I are certain of its feasibility."

THE *Pioneer* was now losing altitude once more, and Hart played the beam of the searchlight in all directions as we descended. He and George watched through one of the floor ports and I followed suit. We were falling, unhampered by air resistance, and our bodies were practically weightless with reference to the *Pioneer*. It was a strange sensation: there was the feeling of exhilaration one experiences when inhaling the first whiff of nitrous oxide in the dentist's chair—a feeling of absolute detachment and care-free confidence in the ultimate result of our precipitous descent.

I found considerable of amusement in pushing myself from side to side of the cabin with a mere touch of a finger. There was no up nor down, and sometimes it seemed to me that we were drifting sideways, sometimes that we fell upward rather than downward. Hart and George were unconcerned. Evidently they were quite accustomed to the sensations. They bent their every energy toward discovering what had caused the disaster to the SF-22 and its convoy.

For several hours we cruised about on the strangest search ever made in the air. Alternately shooting skyward to unconscionable altitudes and dropping to levels five and six to replenish our fuel supply, we covered the greater portion of the United States before the night was over. But the powerful searchlight of the *Pioneer* failed to disclose anything that might be remotely connected with the disappearance of the SF-22.

For me it was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Lightning dashes from coast to coast which required but a few minutes of time—circling many miles above New York or Washington or Savannah in broad daylight with the sun low on the up-curved horizon; then shooting westward into the darkness and skirting the Pacific coast less than fifteen minutes later, but with four hours' actual time difference. Space and time were almost one.

HART had not provided the *Pioneer* with a radio or television transmitter, but there was an excellent receiver, and, through its agency we learned that the world was in a veritable uproar over the latest visitation of the mysterious terror of the sixth air level. All commercial traffic in levels four, five and six was ordered discontinued, and the government air control stations were flashing long messages in code, the import of which could but be guessed. Vision flashes showed immense gatherings at the large airports and in the public squares of the great cities, where the general populace become more and more excited and terrified by the awful possibilities pictured by various prominent speakers.

The governments of all foreign powers made haste to disclaim responsibility for the air attacks or for any attempt at making war on the United States. News broadcasts failed to mention Hart Jones or the *Pioneer*, since the mission had been kept secret. The phenomenon of the rays and the roaring column of light had been observed from many points on this occasion and there was no longer any doubt as to the nature of the terror as visible to the eye, though theories as to the action and source of the rays conflicted greatly and formed the basis of much heated discussion.

Eventually the advancing dawn reached San Francisco, and with its advent Hart decided to make a landing in that city so that my bonds could be delivered.

JONES was apparently a very much mystified and discouraged man. "Jack," he said, "it seems to me that this thing is but the beginning of some tremendous campaign that is being waged against our country by a clever and powerful enemy. And I feel that our work in connection with the unraveling of the mystery and overcoming the enemy or enemies is but begun. It's a cinch that the thing is organized by human minds and is not any sort of a freak of the elements. Our work is cut out for us, all right, and I wish you would stick to George and me through the mess. Will you?"

"Sure," I agreed, readily enough. "After these bonds are delivered I am free for a month."

"Ha! Ha!" cackled George, without mirth. "A month! We're doggoned lucky if we get to the bottom of this in a year."

"Nonsense!" snapped Hart, who was considerably upset by the failure to locate the source of the disastrous rays. "There is nothing supernatural about this, and anything that can be explained on a scientific basis can be run to earth in short order. These rays are man-made and, as such, can be accounted for by man. Our greatest scientists must be put to work on the problem at once—in fact, they have quite probably been called in by the government already."

HE was maneuvering the *Pioneer* to a landing on the broad field of the San Francisco airport. Hundreds of idle planes of all sizes lined the field, and, unmindful of the earliness of the hour, a great crowd was collected in expectation of sensational reports from the occupants of arriving ships. The unusual construction of the *Pioneer* attracted considerable attention and it was with difficulty that the police kept back the crowd when she rolled to a stop near the office of the local government supervisor. We hustled inside and were greeted by that official with open arms.

"Glory be!" he exclaimed. "Hart Jones and the *Pioneer*. Every airport in the land has been on the lookout for you all night. It was feared you had been lost with the SF-22 and the others. Code messages to the supervisors of all districts advised of your mission, though it has been kept out of the general news, as has the message from the enemy."

"Message from the enemy!" gasped

Hart, George and I, echoing the words like parrots.

"Yes. A demand that the United States surrender, and a threat to descend into the lower levels if the demand is not complied with in twenty-four hours!"

"Who is this enemy?" asked Hart, "and where?"

"Who they are is not known," replied the official gravely; "and as to the location, the War Department is puzzled. Direction finders throughout the country took readings on the position of their radio transmitter and these readings differed widely in result. But the consensus of opinion is that the messages originate somewhere out in space, probably between fifty and one hundred thousand miles from our earth."

"Great guns!" Hart glanced at George and me, where we stood with stupidly hanging jaws. "And what does the government want of me now?"

"You are considered to be the one man who might be able to cope with the problem, and are ordered to report to the Secretary of War, in person, immediately."

HART was electrified into instant activity. "Here," he said in a voice of authority that commanded the official's attention and respect, "see that this package of bonds is delivered at once to the addressee and that the addressor is advised of its safe arrival. We're off at once."

Suiting action to the words, he thrust my packet into the hands of the astonished supervisor. Then, turning sharply on his heel, he flung back, "Advise the Secretary of War that I shall report to him in person in less than one hour."

As we stepped through the entrance of the *Pioneer*, he shot a final look at the official and laughed heartily at his sudden accession of energy. We had not the slightest doubt that Hart's orders would be immediately and efficiently carried out.

IN precisely forty-five minutes we stood before the desk of Lawrence Simler, then Secretary of War, in Washington.

"You are Mr. Hartley Jones?" inquired the stern-visaged little man.

"I am, Mr. Secretary, and these are my friends and co-workers, George Boehm and John Makely."

The Secretary acknowledged the introduction gravely, then plunged into the heart of the matter at hand with the quick energy for which he was famed.

"It may or may not be a serious situation," he said, "but certainly it has thus far been quite alarming. In any event, we have taken the matter out of the hands of the Air Traffic Bureau. We are prepared to defy the ultimatum of the enemy, whoever he may be. But we want your help, Mr. Jones. Every ship of the Air Navy will be in the upper levels within the prescribed twenty-four hours, and we will endeavor to stave off their attacks until such time as you can fit the *Pioneer* for a journey to their headquarters."

"How can your antiquated war vessels, capable of hurling a high explosive shell no more than fifty miles, fight off an enemy that is thousands of miles distant?" asked Hart.

"It is believed by the research engineers of the government that, though their headquarters may be located at a great distance, the raiders drop to a comparatively low altitude at the time of one of their attacks, returning immediately thereafter to their base."

Hart Jones shook his head. "The engineers may be correct," he stated; "but how on earth can you expect a little vessel like the *Pioneer* to battle an enemy who is possessed of these terribly destructive weapons and who has sufficient confidence in his own invulnerability to declare war on the greatest country on earth?"

SECRETARY SIMLER dropped his voice to a confidential tone, and his keen gray eyes flashed excitement as he unfolded the details of the

discoveries and plans of the War Department. We three listened in undisguised amazement to a tale of the unceasing labors of our Secret Service agents in foreign countries, of elaborate experiments with deadly weapons and the chemicals of warfare.

We heard of marvelous new rays that could be projected for many miles and destroy whole armies at a single blast; rays that would, in less time than that required to tell of the feat, reduce to a mass of fused metal the greatest first-line battleships of the old days of ocean warfare. We heard of preparations for defensive warfare throughout the civilized world, preparedness that insured so terrible and final a war that it was literally impossible for a great world conflagration to again break out. We learned that the present mysterious signs of a coming war could not possibly have originated in any country on earth, else they would have been known of long in advance, due to the network of the Secret Service system. This war, so unexpectedly thrust upon us, was undoubtedly a war of planets!

"But," objected Hart, "the messages were in English, were they not?"

"They were," continued Secretary Simler, "and that puzzled our experts in the beginning. But, it may well be that our enemy from out the skies has had spies among us for many years and could thus have learned our languages and radio codes. In any event, we are to meet destructive rays with others equally destructive, and you, Hartley Jones, are the man who can make our effectiveness certain."

"I?"

"Yes. How long a time will be required in fitting out the *Pioneer* for reliable space flying?"

HART JONES pondered the matter and I could see that he was overjoyed at the prospect of getting into the thing in earnest. "About one week," he replied, "providing you can send a force of fifty expert mechanics to my hangar at once and supply all material as fast as I shall require it."

"Excellent," said the Secretary. "We'll have the men there in a few hours and will obtain whatever you need, regardless of cost, for immediate delivery. Incidentally, there will be several scientists as well, who will supervise the installation of two types of ray generators and their projecting mechanisms on the Pioneer. You will need them later."

"I don't doubt we shall," said Hart. "And now, with your permission, we shall leave for the hangar. I'm ready to start work."

"Capital!" Secretary Simler pressed every one of a row of buttons set in his desk top. We were dismissed.

"Well," said I, when we reached the outside, "he has given you quite a job, Hart!"

"You said something," he replied. "But, if this threat from the skies proves as real and as calamitous as I think it will, we all have our work cut out for us."

"Do you really believe this enemy comes from another planet?" asked George as we entered the *Pioneer* for the trip home.

"Where else can they be from?" countered Hart. "But, really it makes no difference to us now. We have to go after them in earnest. Don't want to quit, do you, George?"

"Wha-a-at?" shouted George, as he jerked savagely at the main switch of the *Pioneer*. "You know me better than that, Hart. Did I ever let you down in anything?"

"No," admitted the smiling Hart, "you never did, bless your heart. But Jack here is another matter. He has a wife and two kids to look after. That lets him out automatically."

MY heart sank at the words, for I knew that he meant what he said. And, truth to tell, I saw the justice in his remarks.

"But, Hart," I faltered, "I'd like to be in on this thing."

"I know you would, old man. But I

think it's out of the question, for the present at least. You can help with the reconstruction of the *Pioneer*, however."

And meekly I accepted his dictum, though with secretly conflicting emotions. Little did I realize at the time that Hart knew far more than he pretended and that he had merely attempted to salve his own conscience in this manner.

I was very anxious to return to my family, and, as I sped homeward in a taxicab after the *Pioneer* landed at her own hangar, my mind was filled with doubts and fears. Secretary Simler had been very brief in his talk, but his every word carried home the gravity of the situation. What if these invaders carried the war to the surface? Suppose they seared the countryside and the cities and suburbs with rays of horrible nature that would shrivel and blast all that lay in their path? My heart chilled at the thought and it was a distinct relief when I gazed on my little home and saw that it was safe—so far. I paid the driver with a much too large bank note and dashed up my own front steps two at a time.

A few hours later I tore myself away and returned to the hangar, where the *Pioneer* now reposed in a scaffolded cradle. The sight which met my eyes was astonishing in the extreme, for the hangar had been transformed into a huge workshop with seemingly hundreds of men already at work. It was a scene of furious activity, and, to my utter amazement, I obberved that the *Pioneer* was already in an advanced stage of disassembly.

I HAD no difficulty in locating Hart Jones, for he was striding from lathe to workbench to boring mill, issuing his orders with the sureness and decision of a born leader of men. He welcomed me in his most brisk manner and immediately assigned me to a portion of the work in the chemical laboratory—something I was at least partly fitted for.

We labored far into the night, when a siren called us to rest and food. This was to be a night and day job, and not a man of those on duty gave thought to the intense nervous and physical strain. Sixty-five of us I learned there were, though it had seemed there were several times that number.

During the rest period, Hart switched on the large television and sound mechanism of the public news broadcasts. Great excitement prevailed throughout the United States, for there had been a leak and the news had gone abroad regarding the message from the enemy. There was widespread panic and disorder and the government was besieged with demands for authentic news. The twenty-four hours of grace had nearly expired.

Finally the public was told of what actually was happening. Our entire fleet of one thousand air cruisers was in air-level six, waiting for the enemy. America was going to fight in earnest!

FLASHES of our air cruisers in construction and in action came over the screen; voice-vision records of the popular officers of the fleet followed in quick succession. Then came the blow—the first of the strange war.

Two vessels of the air fleet had been destroyed by the triple rays and pillar of fire! Fifty cruisers rushing to the scene had been unable to find any traces of the source of the deadly rays. And, this time, there was an alarming added element. The pillar of fire had risen from a point near Gadsden in Alabama and, in its wake, there spread a sulphurous, smoldering fire that crept along the ground and destroyed all in its path. Farms, factories, and even the steel rails of the railroads were consumed and burned into the ground as if by the breath of some tremendous blast furnace. Hundreds of inhabitants of the section perished, and it was reported that the fumes from the strange fires were drifting in the direction of Birmingham, terrifyingly visible in blue-green clouds of searing vapor.

With the first news of the disaster came a wave of fear that spread over the country with the rapidity of the ether waves that carried the news. Then came stern determination. This enemy must be swept from the skies! Gatherings in public places volunteered en masse for whatever service the government might ask of them. The entire world was in an uproar, and from Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia, came immediate offers of their air fleets to assist in fighting off the Terror.

IN less than an hour there were nearly five thousand cruisers in air-level six, patroling its entire depth from thirty-five thousand to one hundred thousand feet altitude.

We resumed work in the hangar, but the news service was kept in operation as far as the amplifiers were concerned, though the television screen was switched off on account of the likelihood of its distracting the workers.

Again came the report of a major disaster, this time over Butte in Montana. Four American vessels and one British were the victims in level six. And the city of Butte was in flames; blue, horrible flames that literally melted the city into the ground. Again there was no trace of the invaders.

How puny were the efforts of the five thousand air cruisers! Marvels of engineering and mechanical skill, these vessels were. Deadly as were the weapons they carried—weapons so terrible that war on earth was considered impossible since their development—they were helpless against an enemy who could not be located. Though our vessels were capable of boring high into the stratosphere, the enemy worked from still higher.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Hart Jones, who had stopped at my side. "What a contract I have on my hands!"

HE looked in the direction of the partly dismantled *Pioneer*, and I could see by the fixedness of his stare that he was thinking of her insignificant size in comparison with the job she was to undertake.

Above the din of the machines in the hangar rang the startled voice of a news announcer. Panic-stricken he seemed, and we stopped to listen. Another blow of the terror of the skies—and now close by! Over Westchester County in New York State there was a repetition of the previous attacks. Only two of the cruisers had vanished this time; but several towns, including Larchmont and Scarsdale, were pools of molten fire!

Sick at heart, I thought of my little home in Rutherford and of the dear ones it contained. I thought of telephoning, but, what was the use? There was no warding off of this terrible thing that had so suddenly come to our portion of the world. It was the blowing of the last trumpet, the way things looked.

The announcer had calmed himself. His voice droned tonelessly now, as was the custom. Another raid, on the Mexican Border now. We were stupefied by the rapidity of the enemy's attacks; then electrified once more by the most astounding news of all. Alexandria, in Egypt, was the base of a pillar of fire! Fully half of the city was wiped out, and the remainder in a mortal funk, terrorized and riotous. The United States was not alone in the war!

The foreign fleets which reinforced our own were ordered home immediately. But to what avail? The world was doomed!

IN the morning, after nine fearful attacks during the night, there came another message from the enemy and this was repeated in five languages and addressed to the entire world:

"People of Earth," it read, "this is our final warning. One chance has been given and you have proved stubborn. Consider well that your civilization be not entirely destroyed, and answer at the expiration of forty-eight

hours, using our transmitting frequency. Our hand is to be withheld for that period only, when, unless our demands are met, all of your large cities and towns will be destroyed. Our terms for peace are that we be permitted to land without resistance on your part; that you surrender farm and forest lands, cities and towns, able-bodied men of twenty to forty, selected women of seventeen to thirty, and tribute in the form of such supplies and precious metals as we may specify, all to the extent of forty per cent of your resources. No compromise will be accepted."

That was all. It was during a rest period at the Jones hangar and I had brought Hart and George to my home for breakfast. We sat at the table when the news instrument brought the message. Marie was pouring the coffee, and my two small boys, Jim and Jack, had gone to the playroom, from whence their joyous voices could be heard. We four were struck dumb at the announcement, and Marie looked at me with so awful an expression of dread that my coffee turned bitter in my mouth. Marie was just twenty-eight!

"What beasts!" cried Hart. "Allow them to land without resistance? I should say not! Rather we should fight them off until all of us perish."

HE had risen from his chair in his anger. Now he sat down suddenly and shook a forefinger in my face.

"Say!" he exploded. "You can't tell me that some master mind of our own world is not back of this!"

"I'm not telling you," I replied, startled at the fierce fire that flashed from his eyes.

"I know. I'm just trying to think aloud and I'm liable to say anything. But this sort of business is the work of humans as sure as you're born. Still I believe that what Simler says is true. I can't believe that any country on earth is back of the thing. It must be an attack from beings of another planet, but I think they have as a leader a man who is of our own earth."

Marie's eyes opened wide at this. "But how could that be?" she asked. "Surely no one from our earth has made the trip to one of the other planets?"

"It may be that someone has," replied Hart. "Do you remember Professor Oradel? Remember, about ten years ago, I think it was, when he and a half dozen or more of extremely radical scientists built a rocket they claimed would reach the moon? They were ridiculed and hissed and relegated to the position of half-baked, crazy inventors. But Oradel had a large private fortune, and he and his crowd built themselves a workshop and laboratory in a secluded region in the Ozarks. Here they labored and experimented and eventually the rocket ship was constructed. No person was in their confidence, but when the machine was completed they issued a statement to the press to the effect that they were ready for the voyage to the moon, and that, when they returned, a reckoning with the world was to be made for its disbelief and total lack of sympathy. Again the press subjected Oradel to a series of scathing denunciations, and the scientific publications refused to take cognizance of his claims in any way, shape or form.

"THEN, one night, a great rocket roared into the heavens, leaving a terror-stricken countryside in the wake of its brilliantly visible tail. Several observatories whose telescopes picked up and followed the trail of the contraption reported that it described a huge parabola, mounting high into the stratosphere and falling back to earth, where it was lost in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. There the thing ended and it was soon forgotten. But I believe that this rocket ship of Oradel's reached Mars or Venus and that the peoples of whichever planet they reached have been prevailed upon and prepared to war upon the world."

"That would explain their knowl-

edge of our languages and codes," I ventured, "and would likewise account for the fact that the first of our ships to be attacked were those carrying large shipments of currency. Though, if these were destroyed by the fire columns, I can not see what good the money would do them."

"Don't believe the first three were destroyed," grunted Hart. "You'll remember that in those cases the pillars of fire, or whatever you want to call them, were of a cold light, whereas now they are viciously hot and leave behind them the terrible destructive fires that spread and spread and seemingly never are extinguished. No, I think that the force used is something of the nature of an atom-disrupting triad of beams and that these set up the column as a veritable tornado, a whirling column of roaring wind rushing skyward with tremendous velocity. The first ships, I believe, were carried into the startosphere and captured intact by the enemy.

"Since the declaration of war the nature of the column has altered. The three beams, instead of meeting at or near the surface of the earth, now join high in the heavens and the column strikes downward instead of expending its force upward. An added energy is used which produces the terribly destructive force below. And now we are able to locate fragments of the ships destroyed above, whereas previously there were no traces."

"SOUNDS reasonable," commented George. "But why have they not landed and waged their war right here without warning, if that is what they now intend to do?"

"A natural question, George. But I have a hunch that the space flier or fliers of the enemy are conserving fuel by remaining beyond gravity. You know, in space flying, the greatest expenditures of energy are in leaving or landing on a body and, once landed, they might not have sufficient fuel for a getaway. They know we are not exactly helpless, once they are in our midst, and are taking this means of reducing us to the point of complete subjection before risking their precious selves among us."

The telephone startled us by its insistent ring. It was a call from the hangar for Hart. The news broadcast announcer was in the midst of a long dissertation regarding the discovery only this morning that there were certain apparent discrepancies in the movements of the tides and unwonted perturbations of the moon's orbit. There flashed on the screen a view of the great observatory at Mount Wilson, and Professor Laughlin of that institution stepped into the foreground of the scene to take up the discussion so mechanically repeated by the announcer.

"Must leave for the hangar at once," declared Hart, returning from the telephone. "Simler and his staff are there and we are wanted immediately."

"Oh, Jack!" Marie begged with her eyes.

"Got to be done, Honey," I responded, "and, believe me, I am going to do what little I can to help. Suppose we surrendered!"

I SHUDDERED anew at the very thought, and took hurried leave of my family, Hart and George awaiting me in the hall. Had I known what was to transpire before the end of the war, I am certain I would have been in much less of a hurry.

We rushed to the hangar, where Secretary Simler and his party awaited us in the office. Rather, I should say, they waited for Hart Jones.

"Mr. Jones," said the Secretary of War, when the introductions were over, it is up to you to get the *Pioneer* in shape to go out after these terrible creatures before the forty-eight hours have expired. We have replied to their ultimatum and have told them we will have our answer ready within the appointed time, but it is already agreed between the nations of the World Al-

llance that our reply is to be negative. Better far that we submit to the utter destruction of our civilization than agree to their terms."

"I believe I can do it, Mr. Secretary," was Hart Jones' simple comment. "At least I will try. But you must let me have an experienced astronomer at once with whom to consult."

"Astronomer?"

"Yes—immediately. I have a theory, but am not enough of a student of astronomy myself to work it out."

"You shall have the best man in the Air Naval Observatory at once." Secretary Simler chewed his cigar savagely. "And anything else you might need," he concluded.

"There is nothing else, sir." Hart turned from the great men who regarded him solemnly, some with expressions of hope, others with plain distrust written large on their countenances.

THEY left in silence and we returned to our work with renewed vigor. Within an hour there arrived by fast plane an undersized, thick-spectacled man who presented himself as Professor Linquist from the government observatory. He was immediately taken into the office by Hart and the two remained there behind closed doors for the best part of four hours.

Meanwhile the hangar hummed with activity as usual. We in the chemical laboratory were engaged in compounding the high explosive used as fuel in the *Pioneer*. This was being compressed to its absolute limit and was stored in long steel cylinders in the form of a liquid of extremely low temperature. These cylinders were at once transferred to a special steel vault where the temperature was kept at a low-enough point to prevent expansion and consequent loss of the explosive, not to speak of the danger of destroying the entire lot of us in its escape.

The generating apparatus of the *Pioneer* was to be dispensed with for this trip, since it was of no value outside the atmosphere where there was no air from which to extract the elements necessary for the production of the explosive. Instead, the entire supply of fuel for the trip was to be carried aboard the vessel in the cylinders we were engaged in filling. Hart had calculated that there was just sufficient room to store fuel for a trip of about two hundred thousand miles from the earth and a safe return. We hoped this would be enough.

ON the scaffolding around the *Pioneer* there were now so many workers that it seemed they must forever be in one another's way. But the work was progressing with extreme rapidity. Already there projected from her blunt nose a slender rod of shining metal which was the projector of one of the destructive rays whose generator and auxiliaries were being installed under the supervision of the government experts. The force had been trebled and was now working in shifts of two hours each, the pace being so exhausting that highest efficiency was obtained by using these short periods.

Additional rocket tubes were being installed, and the steel framework of a bulge now showed on the hull, this bulge being an additional fuel storage compartment that would provide a slight additional resistance and consequently lower speed in the lower levels, but would prove little hindrance in level six and none at all in outer space.

When Hart emerged from his office he appeared to be very tired, indeed, but his face bore an expression of triumph that could not be mistaken. He and this little scientist from Washington had evidently arrived at some momentous conclusion regarding the enemy.

"Jack," he said, when he reached my bench during his first round of the hangar, "celestial mechanics is a wonderful thing. I had a hunch, and this astronomer chap has proved it correct

with his mathematics. Our friend the enemy is out there in space at a point where his own mass and velocity are exactly counteracted by those of the earth and its satellite, the moon. He is just floating around in space, doing no work whatsoever to maintain his own position. He has temporarily assumed the rôle of a second satellite to us and is revolving around us at a definite period that was calculated by Lindquist. The gravitational pull of the moon keeps him from falling to the earth and that of the earth keeps him from approaching the moon. The resultant of the set of forces is what determines his orbit and the disturbance in the normal balance is what has been observed by the astronomers who reported changes in the tides and in the moon's orbit.

"BUT Lindquist's figures prove that the vessel or fleet of the enemy must be of tremendous size to produce such discrepancies, infinitesimally small though they might seem. We have a big fellow with whom to deal, but we know where to find him now."

"How can he work from a fixed position to make his attacks on the earth at such widely separated points?" I asked.

"It isn't a fixed position in the first place, and besides the earth rotates once in twenty-four hours, while the moon travels around the earth once in about twenty-eight days. But, even so, the widespread destruction could not be accounted for. He must send out scouting parties or something of that sort. That is one of the things we are to learn when we get out there. We'll have some fun, Jack."

"Will the *Pioneer* be ready?" I asked. Evidently I was to go.

"She will, with the exception of the acceleration neutralizes. But I'm having some heavily-cushioned and elastic supports made that will, I believe, save us from injury. And I guess we can stand the discomfort for once."

"Yes," I agreed, "in such a cause. I, for one, am willing to go through anything to help keep this overwhelming disaster from our good old world."

"Jack," he whispered, "we must prevent it. We've got to!"

Then he was gone, and I watched him for a moment as he dashed headlong from one task to another. He was a whirlwind of energy once more.

FORTY-THREE hours and twenty minutes had passed since the receipt of the enemy's ultimatum. The last bolt was being tightened in the remodeled *Pioneer*, and Secretary Simler and his staff were on hand to witness the take-off of the vessel on which the hopes of the world were pinned. The news of our attempt had been spread by cable and printed news only, for there was fear that the enemy might be able to pick up the broadcasts of the news service and thus be able to anticipate us. As usual, there were many scoffers, but the concensus of opinion was in favor of the project. At any rate, what better expedient was there to offer?

The huge airport, now unused on account of the complete cessation of air traffic, was closed to the public. But there was quite a crowd to witness the take-off, the visitors from Washington, the officials of the field, and the two hundred workers who had enabled us to make ready for the adventure in time. There were four to enter the *Pioneer:* Hart, George, Professor Lindquist, and myself. And when the entrance manhole was bolted home behind us, the watchers stood in silence, waiting for the roar of the *Pioneer's* motor. As the starter took hold, Hart waved his hand at one of the ports and every man of those two hundred and some watchers stood at attention and saluted as if he were a born soldier and Hart a born commander-in-chief.

WE taxied heavily across the field, for the *Pioneer* was much overloaded for a quick take-off. She

bumped and bounced for a quarter-mile before taking to the air and then climbed very slowly, indeed, for several minutes. Our speed was a scant two hundred miles an hour when we swung out over New York and headed for the Atlantic. And then Hart made first use of the rocket tubes, not daring to discharge the hot gases below while over populated land at so low an altitude. He touched one button, maintaining the pressure for but a fraction of a second. The ocean slipped more rapidly away from beneath our feet and he touched the button once more. Our speed was now nearly seven hundred miles an hour and we made haste to buckle ourselves into the padded, hammocklike contrivances which had been substituted for the former seats. In a very few minutes we entered level six and the motor was cut off entirely.

A blast from a number of the tail rockets drove me into my supporting hammock so heavily that I found difficulty in breathing, and could scarcely move a muscle to change position. The rate of acceleration was terrific, and I am still unable to understand how Hart was able to manipulate the controls. For myself, I could not even turn my head from its position in the padding and I felt as if I were being crushed by thousands of tons of pressure. Then the pressure was somewhat relieved and I glanced to the instruments. We were more than a thousand miles from our starting point and the speed indicator read seven thousand miles an hour. We were traveling at the rate of nearly two miles a second!

ANOTHER blast from the rockets, this one of interminable length, and I must have lost consciousness. For when I next took note of things I found that we had been out for nearly two hours and that the tremendous pressure of acceleration was relieved. I moved my head experimentally and found that my senses were normal, though there was a strange and alarming sensation of being wrong side up. Then I remembered that I had experienced the same thing when we first searched the upper levels of the atmosphere for the origin of the destructive rays of the enemy.

But this was different! I gazed through a nearby port and saw that the sky was entirely black, the stars shining magnificently brilliant against their velvet background. Streamers of brilliant sunlight from the floor ports struck across the cabin and patterned the ceiling. Looking between my feet I saw the sun as a flaming orb with streamers of incandescence that spread in every direction with such blinding luminosity that I could not bear the sight for more than a few seconds. Off to what I was pleased to think of as our left side, there was a huge globe that I quickly made out as our own earth. Eerily green it shone, and, though a considerable portion of the surface was obscured by patches of white that I recognized as clouds, I could clearly make out the continents of the eastern hemisphere. It was a marvelous sight and I lost several minutes in awed contemplation of the wonder. Then I heard Hart laugh.

"Just coming out of it, Jack?" he asked.

I STARED at him foolishly. It had seemed to me that I was alone in this vast universe, and the sound of his voice startled me. "Guess I'm not fully out of it yet," I said. "Where are we?"

"Oh, about sixty thousand miles out," he replied carelessly; "and we are traveling at our maximum speed—that is, the maximum we need for this little voyage."

"Little voyage!" I gasped. And then I looked at George and the professor and saw that they, too, were grinning at my discomfiture. I laughed crazily, I suppose, for they all sobered at once.

Traveling through space at more than forty thousand miles an hour, it seemed that we were stationary. Move-

ment was now easy—too easy, in fact, for we were practically weightless. The professor was having a time of it manipulating a pencil and a pad of paper on which he had a mass of small figures that were absolutely meaningless to me. He was calculating and plotting our course and, without him, we should never have reached the object we sought.

Time passed rapidly, for the wonders of the naked universe were a never-ending source of fascination. Occasionally a series of rocket charges was fired to keep our direction and velocity, but these were light, and the acceleration so insignificant that we were put to no discomfort whatever. But it was necessary that we keep our straps buckled, for, in the weightless condition, even the slightest increase or decrease in speed or change in direction was sufficient to throw us the length of the cabin, from which painful bruises might be received.

THE supports to which we were strapped and which saved us from being crushed by the acceleration and deceleration, were similar to hammocks, being hooked to the floor and ceiling of the cabin rather than suspended horizontally in the conventional manner. This was for the reason that the energy of the rockets was expended fore and aft, except for steering, and the forces were therefore along the horizontal axis of the vessel. The supports were elastic and the padding deep and soft. Being swiveled at top and bottom, they could swing around so that deceleration as well as acceleration was relieved. For this reason the controls had been altered so that the flexible support in which Hart was suspended could rotate about their pedestal, thus allowing for their operation by the pilot either when accelerating or decelerating. How he could control the muscles of his arms and hands under the extreme conditions is still a mystery to me, however, and George agrees with me in this. We found ourselves to be utterly helpless.

My next impression of the trip is that of swinging rapidly around and finding myself facing the rear wall of the cabin. Then the tremendous pressure once more at a burst from the forward tubes. We had commenced deceleration. For me there were alternate periods of full and semi-consciousness and, to this day, I can remember no more than the high spots of that historical expedition.

THEN we were free to move once more, and I turned to face the instrument board. Our relative velocity had become practically zero; that is, we were traveling through space at about the same speed and in the same direction as the earth. The professor and Hart were consulting a pencil chart and excitedly looking first through the forward ports and then into the screen of the periscope.

"This is the approximate location," averred the professor.

"But they are not here," replied Hart.

George and I peered in all directions and could see nothing excepting the marvels of the universe we had been viewing. The moon now seemed very close and its craters and so-called seas were as plainly visible as in a four-inch telescope on earth. But we saw nothing of the enemy.

The earth was a huge ball still, but much smaller than when I had first observed it from the heavens. The sun's corona—the flaming streamers which the professor declared extended as much as five million miles into space—was partly hidden behind the rim of the earth and the effect was blinding. A thin crescent of brilliant light marked the rim of our planet and the rest was in shadow, but a shadow that was lighted awesomely in cold green by reflected light from her satellite.

"I have it!" suddenly shouted the professor. "We are all in very nearly the same line with reference to the sun, and the enemy is between the blazing

body and ourselves. We must shift our position, move into the shadow of the earth. We have missed our calculation by a few hundred miles, that is all."

All! I thought. These astronomers, so accustomed to dealing in tremendous distances that must be measured in light-years, thought nothing of an error of several hundred miles. But I suppose it was really an inconsiderable amount, at that.

At any rate, we shifted position and looked around a bit more. We saw nothing at first. Then Hart consulted the chronometer.

"Time is up!" he shouted.

ON the instant there was a flash of dazzling green light from a point not a hundred miles from our position, a flash that was followed by a streaking pencil of the same light shooting earthward with terrific velocity. Breathlessly we followed its length, saw it burst like a bomb and hurl three green balls from itself which sped at equally spaced angles to form a perfect triangle. They hovered a moment at about two thousand miles above the surface of the earth, according to the professor, who was using the telescope at the time, and shot their deadly rays toward our world. We were too late to prevent the renewal of hostilities!

Another and another streak of green light followed and we knew that great havoc was being wrought back home. But these served to locate the enemy's position definitely and we immediately set about to draw nearer. We were still somewhat on the dark side of the object, which had prevented our seeing it. Now we swung about so that it was plainly visible. And, what a strange appearance it presented, out here in space!

Fully fifteen miles in diameter, it was a huge doughnut, a great ring of tubing with a center opening that was at least eighty per cent of its maximum diameter. There it hovered, sending out those deadly missles in a continuous stream toward our poor world. As we approached the weird space flier, we saw that a number of objects floated about within the great circle of its inner circumference. The NY-18, the SF-61 and the SF-22, without doubt! The theory of Hart's was correct in every detail.

WE were still at about ten miles distance from the great ring and the streaking light pencils were speeding earthward at the rate of one a minute now. There was no time to lose. Already there was more destruction on its way than had been previously wrought—several times over.

Hart was sighting along a tiny tube that projected into the forward partition and he maneuvered the *Pioneer* until she was nose on to the great ring. He pulled a switch and there came a purring that was entirely new. A row of huge vacuum tubes along the wall lighted to vivid brilliancy and a throbbing vibration filled the artificial air of the cabin.

He pulled a small lever at the side of the tube and the vessel rocked to the energy that was released from those vacuum tubes. The thin rod which had been installed at the *Pioneer's* nose burst into brilliant flame—orange tinted luminescence that grew to a sphere of probably ten feet in diameter. Then there was a heavy shock and the ball of fire left its position and, with inconceivable velocity, sprang straight for the side of the great ring. It was a fair hit and, when the weird missile found its mark, it simply vanished—swallowed up in the metal walls of the monster vessel. For a moment we thought nothing was to result. Then we burst into shouts of joy, for a great section of the ring fused into nothingness and was gone! Fully a quarter of the circumference of the ring had disappeared into the vacuum of space. Truly, the governments of Earth had developed some terrible weapons of their own!

We watched, breathless.

THE green light pencils no longer streaked their paths of death in the direction of our world, which now seemed so remote. The great ring with the vacant space in its rim wabbled uncertainly for a moment as though some terrific upheaval from within was tearing it asunder. Then it lurched directly for the *Pioneer*. We had been observed!

But Hart was equal to the occasion and he shot the *Pioneer* in the direction of the earth with such acceleration that we all were flattened into our supports with the same old violence. Then, with equal violence, we decelerated. The ring was following so closely that it actually rushed many hundreds of miles past us before it was brought to rest. From it there sprang one of the light pencils, and the *Pioneer* was rocked as by a heavy gale when it rushed past on its harmless way into infinity. The enemy had missed.

Meanwhile, Hart was operating another mechanism that was new to the *Pioneer* and again he sighted along the tiny tube. This time there was no sound within, no ball of fire without, no visible ray. But, when he had pressed the release of this second energy, the ring seemed to shrivel and twist as if gripped by a giant's hand. It reeled and spun. Then, no longer in a balance of forces, it commenced its long drop earthward.

His job finished and finished well, Hart Jones collapsed.

FOLLOWING his more than three days and four nights of superhuman endeavor, it seemed strange to see Hart slumped white and still over the control pedestal. He who had energy far in excess of that of any of the rest of us had worn himself out. Having had no rest or sleep in nearly a hundred hours, the body that housed so wonderful a spirit simply refused to carry on. Tenderly we stretched him on the cabin floor, the *Pioneer* drifting in space the while. The professor, who was likewise something of a physician, listened to his heart, drew back his eyelids, and pronounced him in no danger whatever.

We slapped his wrists, sprinkled his face and neck with cold water from the drinking supply, and were soon rewarded by his return to consciousness. He smiled weakly and fell sound asleep. No war in the universe could have wakened him then, so we lifted him to his feet—rather I should say, we guided his practically floating body—and strapped him in George's hammock, preparing for the homeward journey. Though dangling from the straps in a position that would be vertical were we on earth, he slept like a baby. George took the controls in Hart's place and the professor and I returned to our accustomed supports.

The return trip was considerably slower, as George did not wish to push the *Pioneer* to its limit as had been necessary when coming out to meet the enemy, nor was he able to keep control of the ship against a too-rapid acceleration. Consequently, the rate of acceleration was much lower and we were not nearly as uncomfortable as on the outgoing trip. Thus, nearly ten hours were required for the return. And Hart slept through it all.

IN order to make best use of the small amount of fuel still in the cylinders, George circled the earth five times before we entered the upper limits of the atmosphere, the circles becoming of smaller diameter at each revolution and the speed of the ship proportionately reduced. An occasional discharge from one of the forward rocket tubes assisted materially in the deceleration, yet, when we slipped into level five, our speed was so great that the temperature of the cabin rose alarmingly, due to the friction of the air against the hull of the vessel. It was necessary to use the last remaining ounce of fuel to reduce the velocity to a safe value. A long glide to earth was then our only means of landing and, since we were over the

Gulf of Mexico at the time, we had no recourse other than landing in the State of Texas.

Passing over Galveston in level three, we found that the Humble oil fields and a great section of the surrounding country had been the center of one of the enemy bombardments. All was blackness and ruin for many miles between this point and Houston. At Houston Airport we landed, unheralded but welcome.

The lower levels were once more filled with traffic, and one of the southern route transcontinental liners had just made its stop at this point. The arrival of the *Pioneer* was thus witnessed by an unusually large crowd, and, when the news was spread to the city, their numbers increased with all the rapidity made possible by the various means of transportation from the city.

So it was that Hart Jones, after we finally succeeded in awakening him and getting him to his feet, was hailed by a veritable multitude as the greatest hero of all time. The demonstrations become so enthusiastic that police reserves, hastily summoned from the city, were helpless in their attempts to keep the crowd in order.

IT was with greatest difficulty that Hart was finally extricated from the clutches of the mob and conveyed to the new Rice Hotel in Houston, where it was necessary to obtain medical attention for him immediately. He was in no condition at the time to receive the richly deserved plaudits of the multitude, and, truth to tell, we others from the *Pioneer* were in much the same shape.

To me that night will always be the most terrible of nightmares. My first thought was of my family and, when I had been assigned to a room, I immediately asked the switchboard operator for a long-distance connection to my home in Rutherford. There was complete silence for a minute and I jangled the hook impatiently, my head throbbing with a thousand aches and pains. Then, to my surprise, the voice of the hotel manager greeted me.

"Mr. Makely," he said softly, and I thought there was a peculiar ring in his voice, "I think you had better not try to get Rutherford this evening. We are sending the house physician to your room at once and—there are orders from Washington, you know—you are to think of nothing at the present but sleep and a long rest."

"Why—why—" I stammered, "can't you see? I must communicate with my family. They must know of my return. I must know if they're safe and well."

"I'm sorry, sir," apologized the manager. "Government orders, you know." And he hung up.

Something in that soft voice brought to me an inkling of the truth. An icy hand gripped my heart as I heard a knock at the door. With palsied fingers I turned the key and admitted the professor and a kindly-faced, elderly gentleman with a small black bag. One look at the professor told me the truth. I seized his two arms in a grip that made him wince.

"Tell me! Tell me!" I demanded. "Has anything happened to my family?"

"Jack," said the professor slowly, "while we were out there watching Hart destroy the enemy vessel, Rutherford was destroyed!"

IT must be that I frightened him by my answering stare, for he backed away from me in apparent fear. I noticed that the doctor was rummaging in his bag. I know I did not speak, did not cry out, for my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. It seemed I must go mad. The professor still backed away from me; then, wiry little athlete that he was, he sprang directly for my knees in a beautiful football tackle. I remember that point clearly and how I admired his agility at the time. I remember the glint of a small instrument in the doctor's hand. Then all was blackness.

Eight days later, they tell me it was, I returned to painful consciousness in a hospital bed. But let me skip the agony of mind I experienced then: Suffice it to say that, when I was able, I set forth for Washington. Hart Jones was there and he had sent for me. But I took little interest in the going; did not even bother to speculate as to the reason for his summons. I had devoured the news during my convalescence and now, more than two weeks after the destruction of the Terror, I knew the extent of the damage wrought upon our earth by those deadly green light pencils we had seen issuing from the huge ring up there in the skies. The horror of it all was fresh in my mind, but my own private horror overshadowed all.

I WAS glad that Hart had been so signally honored by the World Peace Board, that he was now the most famous and popular man in the entire world. He deserved it all and more. But what cared I — I who had done least of all to help in his great work — that the Terror had been found where it buried itself in the sand of the Sahara when falling to earth? What cared I that the discoveries made in the excavating of the huge metal ring were of inestimable value to science?

It gave me passing satisfaction to note that all of Hart Jones' theories were borne out by the discoveries; that Oradel and his minions were responsible for this terrible war; that the planet they aligned against us was Venus and that more than a hundred thousand of the Venerians had been carried in that weird engine of destruction which had been brought down by Hart.

It was interesting to read of the fall of that huge ring; how it was heated to incandescence when it entered our atmosphere at such tremendous velocity; of the tidal waves of concentric billows in the sand that led to its discovery by Egyptian Government planes. The broadcast descriptions and the television views of the stunted and twisted Venerians whose bodies were recovered from the partly consumed wreckage were interesting. But it all left me cold. I had no further interest in life. That the world had escaped an overwhelming disaster was clear, and it gave me a certain pleasure. But for me it might as well have been completely destroyed.

Nevertheless, I went to Washington. I felt somehow that I owed it to Hart Jones, the greatest world hero since Lindbergh. I would at least listen to what he had to say.

A FAST plane carried me, a plane chartered by the government. To me it seemed that it crawled, though it was a sixth-level ship, and made the trip in record time. Why I was impatient to reach Washington I do not know, for I was absolutely disinterested in anything that might occur there. It was merely that my nerves were on edge, I suppose, and everything annoyed me.

Hart met me at the airport and greeted me like a long-lost brother. He talked incessantly and jumped from one subject to the other with the obvious intention of trying to get my mind off my troubles until we reached his office in the Air Traffic building.

On his door there was the legend, "Director of Research," and, when we had entered, I observed that the office was furnished with all the luxury that suited his new position. I dropped into a deeply upholstered chair at the side of his mahogany desk, and, for the space of several minutes, Hart regarded me with concern, speaking not a word.

"Jack, old man," he finally ventured, "I can't talk to you of this thing. But it makes me feel very badly to see you take it so hard. There are many things you have to live for, old top, and it is to talk about these that I sent for you."

"You mean work?" I asked.

"Yes. That is the best thing for us all, in any emergency or under any

circumstances whatever. Preston wants you back for one thing, and he authorized me to tell you that the job of office manager is waiting for you at double your former salary."

MY eyes misted at this. Preston was a good old scout! But I could never bear it to return to the old surroundings, even in the city. "No, Hart," I said, "I'd rather be away from New York and from that part of the country. Associations, you know."

"I understand," he replied, "and that is just what I had hoped you would decide. Because I have a job for you in the Air Service. A good one, too.

"You know there is much reconstruction work to be done on earth. More than forty cities and towns have been wiped out of existence and these must be rebuilt. That will occupy the minds and energies of thousands who have been bereaved as you have. But, in the Air Service, we have a program that I believe will be more to your liking. The log of the *Terror*, in Oradel's handwriting, was found intact, as were a number of manuscripts pertaining to plans of the Venerians.

"These misshapen creatures were quite evidently educated by Oradel to a hatred of our world. We have reason to believe that other attacks may follow, for they were obviously intending to migrate here in millions. And, according to records found aboard the *Terror*, they are of advanced scientific accomplishment. We may expect them to construct other vessels similar to the *Terror* and to come here again. We must be prepared to fight them off, to carry the war to their own planet if necessary. My work is to organize a world fleet of space ships for this purpose, and I'd like you to help me in this. The work will take you all over the world and will keep you too busy to think about—things."

It was just like Hart, and I thanked him wordlessly, but from the bottom of my heart. Yes, I would accept his generous offer. Though I was no engineer, I had a knowledge of scientific subjects a little above the average, and I could follow instructions. By George, it was the very thing! Suddenly I grew enthusiastic.

THERE was the sound of voices in the outer office, and Hart's secretary entered to announce the arrival of George Boehm and Professor Lindquist. This was great!

Chubby George, red-faced and smiling as ever, embraced me with one short arm and pounded me on the back with his other fist in his jovial, joking manner. It was good to have friends like these! The professor held forth his hand timidly. He was thinking of that tackle and the half-Nelson he had used on me while the doctor slipped that needle into my arm back there in Houston.

"Don't remove your glasses, Professor," I laughed; "I'm not going to hit you. That was a swell tackle of yours, and you did me a big service down there in the Rice Hotel."

He beamed with pleasure and gripped my hand—mightily, for such a little fellow. George was whispering to Hart, and I could see that they were greatly excited over something.

"Jack," said Hart, when the professor and I finished talking things over, "George here wants you to take a little trip over to Philly with him. He has something there he wants to show you."

I looked from one to the other for signs of a hoax. These two, under normal circumstances, were always up to something. But what I saw in their expressions convinced me that I had better go, and somehow, there rose in my breast a forlorn hope.

"All right," I agreed. "Let's go!"

ONCE more we four took off together, this time in a speedy little first-level cabin plane of Hart's design, piloted by the irrepressible George. I was brimming with questions, but George kept up such a run-

ning fire of small talk that I was unable to get in a single word throughout the short trip to the Quaker City. It was quite evident that something was in the wind.

Instead of landing at the airport, George swung across the city and dropped to the roof landing space of a large building which I recognized as the Germantown Hospital. We had no sooner landed when I was rushed from the plane to the penthouse over the elevator shafts. We were soon on the main floor and George went immediately to the desk at the receiving office, where he engaged in earnest conversation with the nurse in charge.

"What are you doing—committing me?" I asked, half joking only. For, from the mysterious expression of my friends' faces, I was not sure what to expect.

"No," laughed Hart. "George learned of the existence of a patient here who may turn out to be a very good friend of yours."

I turned this over in my mind, which did not yet function quite normally. A friend? Why, I had very few that could really be termed good friends outside of those that accompanied me. It could mean but one thing. Possibly one of my children—or even my dear wife—might have escaped somehow. I followed in a daze as a white-capped and gowned nurse led us along the corridor and into a ward where there were dozens of high, white beds.

SOME of the patients were swathed in bandages; some sat up in their beds, reading or just staring; others lay inert and pale. The reek of iodoform prevaded the large room.

We stopped at the bedside of one of the staring patients, a young woman who looked unseeingly at our party. Great heavens, it was Marie!

A physician stood at the other side of her bed, finger on her pulse. The others drew back as I approached her side, raised her free hand to my lips and spoke to her.

"Marie, dear," I asked gently, forcing the lump from my throat as best I could, "don't you know me? It's Jack, Honey."

The fixed stare of the great blue eyes shifted in my direction. It seemed that they looked through and past me into some terrible realm where only horror held sway. She drew her hand from my grasp and passed it before those staring, unnatural eyes. There was an audible gulp from George. But the doctor smiled encouragement to me. I tried once more.

"Marie," I said, "where are Jim and Jackie?"

THE hand fluttered to her lap, where it lay, blue-veined and pitifully thin. The stare focussed on me, seemed to concentrate. Then the film was gone from the eyes and she saw—she knew me!

"Oh, Jack!" she wailed, "I have been away. Don't you know where they are?"

My heart nearly stopped at this, but I sat on the edge of the bed and took her in my arms, looking at the doctor for approval. He nodded his head brightly and beckoned to the nurse.

"Bring the children," I heard him whisper.

My cup was full. But I must be calm for Marie's sake. She had closed her eyes now and great tears coursed down her waxen cheeks. Her body shook with sobs.

"She'll recover?" I asked the doctor.

"You bet. Just an aggravated case of amnesia. Hasn't eaten. Didn't even know her children. Cured now, but she'll need a few weeks to build up." He snapped shut the lid of his watch.

Those succinct sentences were the finest I had ever heard.

Marie clung to me like an infant to its mother. Her sobs gradually ceased and she looked into my eyes. Little Jim and Jack had come in and were clamoring for recognition.

"Oh, Jack," Marie whispered, "I'm so happy."

She relinquished me and turned her attention to the children. I saw that my friends had left and that an orderly was placing screens about us. So I'll close the screen on the remainder of this most happy reunion.

IT was several days before I had the complete story. Being lonesome during my absence when we were preparing for the voyage into space, and not knowing just when I would return, Marie had packed a grip and taken the train for Philadelphia, deciding to spend a few days with her Aunt Margaret, or at least to remain there with the children until I returned.

She had boarded the train at Manhattan Transfer at about the time we reached the location of the *Terror* and the train was just pulling out of the station when there came the first of the new attacks of the enemy. She thought that the pillar of fire rose from the approximate location of Rutherford, but was not sure until they reached Newark, when the news was spread throughout the train by passengers who boarded it there. She worried and cried over the loss of our little home and had worked herself into a state of extreme nervousness and near-hysteria by the time they reached New Brunswick.

Then, as the long train left New Brunswick, there was another attack, this one on the town they had just left. The last two cars of the train were blown from the track by the initial concussion, and the remainder of the train brought to a grinding, jerking stop that threw the passengers into a panic.

Already hysterical, Marie was in no condition to bear up under the shock, and the loss of memory followed. Jack and Jim clung to her, of course, and were taken to the Germantown Hospital with her when the wreck victims were transferred to that point. She had no identification on her person, and it was by sheerest luck that George, who was visiting a friend in the same hospital, chanced to see her and thought he recognized her.

That was all of it, but to me it was more than enough. From the depths of despondency, I rose to the peaks of elation. It was true that we would have to establish a new home, but this would be a joy as never before. Those I had given up as lost were restored to me and I was content. Hart would have to make some changes in the duties of that new job—the world travel was out of the picture. I had had my fill of adventure.

Besides, the hot spell was over.

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The Forgotten Planet

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

I HAVE been asked to record, plainly and without prejudice, a brief history of the Forgotten Planet.

That this record, when completed, will be sealed in the archives of the Interplanetary Alliance and remain there, a secret and rather dreadful bit of history, is no concern of mine. I am an old man, well past the century mark, and what disposal is made of my work is of little importance to me. I grow weary of

The authentic account of why cosmic man damned an outlaw world to be, forever, a leper of Space.

"It's nothing. Close the exit; we depart at once."

life and living, which is good. The fear of death was lost when our scientists showed us how to live until we grew weary of life. But I am digressing—an old man's failing.

The Forgotten Planet was not always so named. The name that it once bore had been, as every child knows, stricken from the records, actual and mental, of the Universe. It is well that evil should not be remembered. But in order that this history may be clear in the centuries to come, my record should go back to beginnings.

So far as the Universe is concerned, the history of the Forgotten Planet begins with the visit of the first craft ever to span the space between the

worlds: the crude, adventuresome *Edorn*, whose name, as well as the names of the nine Zenians who manned her, occupy the highest places in the roll of honor of the Universe.

Ame Baove, the commander and historian of the *Edorn*, made but brief comment on his stop at the Forgotten Planet. I shall record it in full:

"We came to rest upon the surface of this, the fourth of the planets visited during the first trip of the *Edorn*, eighteen spaces before the height of the sun. We found ourselves surrounded immediately by vast numbers of creatures very different from ourselves, and from their expressions and gestures, we gathered that they were both curious and unfriendly.

"Careful analysis of the atmosphere proved it to be sufficiently similar to our own to make it possible for us to again stretch our legs outside the rather cramped quarters of the *Edorn*, and tread the soil of still another world.

"No sooner had we emerged, however, than we were angrily beset by the people of this unfriendly planet, and rather than do them injury, we retired immediately, and concluded our brief observations through our ports.

"The topography of this planet is similar to our own, save that there are no mountains, and the flora is highly colored almost without exception, and apparently quite largely parasitical in nature. The people are rather short in stature, with hairless heads and high foreheads. Instead of being round or oval, however, the heads of these people rise to a rounded ridge which runs back from a point between and just above the eyes, nearly to the nape of the neck behind. They give evidence of a fair order of intelligence, but are suspicious and unfriendly. From the number and size of the cities we saw, this planet is evidently thickly populated.

"We left about sixteen spaces before the height of the sun, and continued towards the fifth and last planet before our return to Zenia."

THIS report, quite naturally, caused other explorers in space to hesitate. There were so many friendly, eager worlds to visit, during the years that relations between the planets were being established, that an unfriendly people were ignored.

However, from time to time, as spaceships became perfected and more common, parties from many of the more progressive planets did call. Each of them met with the same hostile reception, and at last, shortly after the second War of the Planets, the victorious Alliance sent a fleet of the small but terrible Deuber Spheres, convoyed by four of the largest of the disintegrator ray-ships, to subjugate the Forgotten Planet.

Five great cities were destroyed, and the Control City, the seat of the government, was menaced before the surly inhabitants conceded allegiance to the Alliance. Parties of scientists, fabricators, and workmen were then landed, and a dictator was appointed.

From all the worlds of the Alliance, instruments and equipment were brought to the Forgotten Planet. A great educational system was planned and executed, the benign and kindly influence of the Alliance made every effort to improve the conditions existing on the Forgotten Planet, and to win the friendship and allegiance of these people.

For two centuries the work went on. Two centuries of bloodshed, strife, hate and disturbance. No where else within the known Universe was there ill feeling. The second awful War of the Planets had at last succeeded in teaching the lesson of peace.

Two centuries of effort—wasted effort. It was near the end of the second

century that my own story begins.

Commander at that time of the supercruiser *Tamon*, a Special Patrol ship of the Alliance, I was not at all surprised to receive orders from the Central Council to report at emergency speed. Special Patrol work in those days, before the advent of the present de-centralized system, was a succession of false starts, hurried recalls, and urgent, emergency orders.

I OBEYED at once. In the Special Patrol service, there is no questioning orders. The planet Earth, from which I sprang, is and always has been proud of the fact that from the very beginning, her men have been picked to command the ships of the Special Patrol. No matter how dangerous, how forlorn and hopeless the mission given to a commander of a Special Patrol ship, history has never recorded that any commander has ever hesitated. That is why our uniform of blue and silver commands the respect that it does even in this day and age of softening and decadence, when men—but again an old man digresses. And perhaps it is not for me to judge.

I pointed the blunt nose of the *Tamon* at Zenia, seat of the Central Council, and in four hours, Earth time, the great craft swept over the gleaming city of the Central Council and settled swiftly to the court before the mighty, columned Hall of the Planets.

Four pages of the Council, in their white and scarlet livery, met me and conducted me instantly to a little anteroom behind the great council chamber.

There were three men awaiting me there; three men whose faces, at that time, were familiar to every person in the known Universe.

Kellen, the oldest of the three, and the spokesman, rose as I entered the room. The others did likewise, as the pages closed the heavy doors behind me.

"You are prompt, and that is good," thought Kellen. "I welcome you. Remove now thy menore."

I glanced up at him swiftly. This must surely be an important matter, that I was asked to remove my menore band.

It will, of course, be understood that at that time we had but a bulky and clumsy instrument to enable us to convey and receive thought; a device consisting of a heavy band of metal, in which were imbedded the necessary instruments and a tiny atomic energy generator, the whole being worn as a circlet or crown upon the head.

Wonderingly, I removed my menore, placed it upon the long, dark table atround which the three men were standing, and bowed. Each of the three, in turn, lifted their gleaming circlets from their heads, and placed them likewise upon the table before them.

"YOU wonder," said Kellen, speaking of course, in the soft and liquid universal language, which is, I understand, still disseminated in our schools, as it should be. "I shall explain as quickly and as briefly as possible.

"We have called you here on a dangerous mission. A mission that will require tact and quickness of mind as well as bravery. We have selected you, have called you, because we are agreed that you possess the qualities required. Is it not so?" He glanced at his two companions, and they nodded gravely, solemnly, without speaking.

"You are a young man, John Hanson," continued Kellen," but your record in your service is one of which you can be proud. We trust you—with knowledge that is so secret, so precious, that we must revert to speech in order to convey it; we dare not trust it, even in this protected and guarded place, to the menore's quicker but less discreet communication."

He paused for a moment, frowning thoughtfully as though dreading to begin. I waited silently, and at last he spoke again.

"There is a world"—and he named a name which I shall not repeat, the name of the Forgotten Planet—"that is a festering sore upon the body of the Universe. As you know, for two centuries we have tried to pass on to these people an understanding of peace and friendship. I believe that nothing has been left undone. The Council and the forces behind it have done everything within their power. And now—"

He stopped again, and there was an expression of deepest pain written upon his wise and kindly face. The pause was for but an instant.

"And now," he went on firmly, "it is at an end. Our work has been undone. Two centuries of effort—undone. They have risen in revolt, they have killed all those sent by the Alliance of which this Council is the governing body and the mouthpiece, and they have sent us an ultimatum—a threat of war!"

"What?"

KELLEN nodded his magnificent old head gravely.

"I do not wonder that you start," he said heavily. "War! It must not be. It cannot be! And yet, war is what they threaten."

"But, sir!" I put in eagerly, I was young and rash in those days. "Who are they, to make war against a united Universe?"

"I have visited your planet, Earth," said Kellen, smiling very faintly. "You have a tiny winged insect you call *bee*. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"The bee is a tiny thing, of little strength. A man, a little child, might crush one to death between a thumb and finger. But the bee may sting before he is crushed, and the sting may linger on for days, a painful and unpleasant thing. Is that not so?"

"I see, sir," I replied, somewhat abashed before the tolerant, kindly wisdom of this great man. "They cannot hope to wage successful war, but they may bring much suffering to others."

"Much suffering," nodded Kellen, still gently smiling. "And we are determined that this thing shall not be. Not"—and his face grew gray with a terrible and bitter resolve—"not if we have to bring to bear upon that dark and unwilling world the disintegrating rays of every ship of the Alliance, so that the very shell of the planet shall disappear, and no life ever again shall move upon its surface.

"But this," and he seemed to shudder at the thought, "is a terrible and a ruthless thing to even contemplate. We must first try once again to point out to them the folly of their ways. It is with this mission that we would burden you, John Hanson."

"IT is no burden, but an honor, sir," I said quietly.

"Youth! Youth!" Kellen chided me gently. "Foolish, yet rather glorious. Let me tell you the rest, and then we shall ask for your reply again.

"The news came to us by a small scout ship attached to that unhappy world. It barely made the journey to Jaron, the nearest planet, and crashed so badly, from lack of power, that all save one man were killed.

"He, luckily, tore off his menore, and insisted in speech that he be brought here. He was obeyed, and, in a dying condition, was brought to this very chamber." Kellen glanced swiftly, sadly, around the room, as though he could still visualize that scene.

"Every agent of the Alliance upon that hateful planet was set upon and killed, following the working out of some gigantic and perfectly executed plan—all save the crew of this one tiny scout ship, which was spared to act as a messenger.

"'Tell your great Council,' was the message these people sent to us, 'that here is rebellion. We do not want, nor will we tolerate, your peace. We have learned now that upon other worlds than ours there are great riches. These we shall take. If there is re-

sistance, we have a new and a terrible death to deal. A death that your great scientists will be helpless against; a horrible and irresistable death that will make desolate and devoid of intelligent life any world where we are forced to sow the seeds of ultimate disaster.

"'We are not yet ready. If we were, we would not move, for we prefer that your Council have time to think about what is surely to come. If you doubt that we have the power to do what we have threatened to do, send one ship, commanded by a man whose word you will trust, and we will prove to him that these are no empty words.'

"THAT, as nearly as I can remember it," concluded Kellen, "is the message. The man who brought it died almost before he had finished.

"That is the message. You are the man we have picked to accept their challenge. Remember, though, that there are but the four of us in this room. There are but four of us who know these things. If you for any reason do not wish to accept this mission, there will be none to judge you, least of all, any one of us, who know best of all the perils."

"You say, sir," I said quietly, although my heart was pounding in my throat, and roaring in my ears, "that there would be none to judge me.

"Sir, there would be myself. There could be no more merciless judge. I am honored that I have been selected for this task, and I accept the responsibility willingly, gladly. When is it your wish that we should start?"

The three presiding members of the Council glanced at each other, faintly smiling, as though they would say, as Kellen had said a short time before: "Youth! Youth!" Yet I believe they were glad and somewhat proud that I had replied as I did.

"You may start," said Kellen, "as soon as you can complete the necessary preparations. Detailed instructions will be given you later."

He bowed to me, and the others did likewise. Then Kellen picked up his menore and adjusted it.

The interview was over.

"WHAT do you make it?" I asked the observer. He glanced up from his instrument.

"Jaron, sir. Three degrees to port; elevation between five and six degrees. Approximate only, of course, sir."

"Good enough. Please ask Mr. Barry to hold to his present course. We shall not stop at Jaron."

The observor glanced at me curiously, but he was too well disciplined to hesitate or ask questions.

"Yes, sir!" he said crisply, and spoke into the microphone beside him.

None of us wore menores when on duty, for several reasons. Our instruments were not nearly as perfect as those in use to-day, and verbal orders were clearer and carried more authority than mental instructions. The delicate and powerful electrical and atomic mechanism of our ship interfered with the functioning of the menores, and at that time the old habit of speech was far more firmly entrenched, due to hereditary influence, than it is now.

I nodded to the man, and made my way to my own quarters. I wished most heartily that I could talk over my plans with someone, but this had been expressly forbidden.

"I realize that you trust your men, and more particularly your officers," Kellen had told me during the course of his parting conversation with me. "I trust them also—yet we must remember that the peace of mind of the Universe is concerned. If news, even a rumor, of this threatened disaster should become known, it is impossible to predict the disturbance it might create.

"Say nothing to anyone. It is your problem. You alone should leave the ship when you land; you alone shall hear or see the evidence they have to present, and you alone shall bring word of it to us. That is the wish of the Council."

"Then it is my wish," I had said, and so it had been settled.

AFT, in the crew's quarters, a gong sounded sharply; the signal for changing watches, and the beginning of a sleep period. I glanced at the remote control dials that glowed behind their glass panel on one side of my room. From the registered attraction of Jaron, at our present speed, we should be passing her within, according to Earth time, about two hours. That meant that their outer patrols might be seeking our business, and I touched Barry's attention button, and spoke into the microphone beside my bunk.

"Mr. Barry? I am turning in for a little sleep. Before you turn over the watch to Eitel, will you see that the nose rays are set for the Special Patrol code signal for this enar? We shall be close to Jaron shortly."

"Yes, sir! Any other orders?"

"No. Keep her on her present course. I shall take the watch from Mr. Eitel."

Since there have been changes since those days, and will undoubtedly be others in the future, it might be well to make clear, in a document such as this, that at this period, all ships of the Special Patrol Service identified themselves by means of invisible rays flashed in certain sequences, from the two nose, or forward, projectors. These code signals were changed every enar, a period of time arbitrarily set by the Council; about eighteen days, as time is measured on the Earth, and divided into ten periods, as at present, known as enarens. These were further divided into enaros, thus giving us a time-reckoning system for use in space, corresponding roughly to the months, days and hours of the Earth.

I retired, but not to sleep. Sleep would not come. I knew, of course, that if curious outer patrol ships from Jaron did investigate us, they would be able to detect our invisible ray code signal, and thus satisfy themselves that we were on the Council's business. There would be no difficulty on that score. But what I should do after landing upon the rebellious sphere, I had not the slightest idea.

"BE stern, indifferent to their threats," Kellen had counseled me, "but do everything within your power to make them see the folly of their attitude. Do not threaten them, for they are a surly people, and you might precipitate matters. Swallow your pride if you must; remember that yours is a gigantic responsibility, and upon the information you bring us may depend the salvation of millions. I am convinced that they are not—you have a word in your language that fits exactly. Not pretending what is the word?"

"Bluffing?" I had supplied in English, smiling.

"Right! Bluffing. It is a very descriptive word. I am sure they are not bluffing."

I was sure of it also. They knew the power of the Alliance; they had been made to feel it more than once. A bluff would have been a foolish thing, and these people were not fools. In some lines of research they were extraordinarily brilliant.

But what could their new, terrible weapon be? Rays we had; at least half a dozen rays of destruction; the terrible dehydrating ray of the Deuber Spheres, the disintegrating ray that dated back before Ame Baove and his first voyage into space, the concentrated ultra-violet ray that struck men down in fiery torment. . . No, it could hardly be a new ray that was their boasted weapon.

What, then? Electricity had even then been exhausted of its possibilities. Atomic energy had been released, harnessed, and directed. Yet it would take fabulous time and expense to make these machines of destruction do what they claimed they would do.

Still pondering the problem, I did fall at last into a fitful travesty of sleep.

I WAS glad when the soft clamor of the bell aft announced the next change of watch. I rose, cleared the cobwebs from my brain with an icy shower, and made my way directly to the navigating room.

"Everything tidy, sir," said Eitel, my second officer, and a Zenian. He was thin and very dark, like all Zenians, and had the high, effeminate voice of that people. But he was cool and fearless and had the uncanny cerebration of his kind; I trusted him as completely as I trusted Barry, my first officer, who, like myself, was a native of Earth. "Will you take over?"

"Yes," I nodded, glancing at the twin charts beneath the ground glass top of the control table. "Get what sleep you can the next few enaros. Presently I shall want every man on duty and at his station."

He glanced at me curiously, as the observer had done, but saluted and left with only a brief, "Yes, sir!" I returned the salute and turned my attention again to the charts.

The navigating room of an interplanetary ship is without doubt unfamiliar ground to most, so it might be well for me to say that such ships have, for the most part, twin charts, showing progress in two dimensions; to use land terms, lateral and vertical. These charts are really no more than large sheets of ground glass, ruled in both directions with fine black lines, representing all relatively close heavenly bodies by green lights of varying sizes. The ship itself is represented by a red spark, and the whole is, of course, entirely automatic in action, the instruments comprising the chart being operated by super-radio reflexes.

JARON, the charts showed me at a glance, was now far behind. Almost directly above—it is necessary to resort to these unscientific terms to make my meaning clear—was the tiny world Elon, home of the friendly but impossibly dull winged people, the only ones in the known Universe. I was there but once, and found them almost laughably like our common dragon-flies on Earth; dragon-flies that grow some seven feet long, and with gauzy wings of amazing strength.

Directly ahead, on both charts, was a brilliantly glowing sphere of green—our destination. I made some rapid mental calculations, studying the few fine black lines between the red spark that was our ship, and the nearest edge of the great green sphere. I glanced at our speed indicator and the attraction meter. The little red slide that moved around the rim of the attraction meter was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was from straight ahead; the great black hand was nearly a third of the way around the face.

We were very close; two hours would bring us into the atmospheric envelope. In less than two hours and a half, we would be in the Control City of what is now called the Forgotten Planet!

I glanced forward, through the thick glass partitions, into the operating room. Three men stood there, watching intently; they too, were wondering why we visited the unfriendly world.

The planet itself loomed up straight ahead, a great half-circle, its curved rim sharp and bright against the empty blackness of space; the chord ragged and blurred. In two hours. I turned away and began a restless pacing.

AN hour went by; an hour and a half. I pressed the attention button to the operating room, and gave orders to reduce our speed by half. We were very close to the outer fringe of the atmospheric envelope. Then, keeping my eye on the big surface-temperature gauge, with its stubby red hand, I resumed my nervous pacing.

Slowly the thick red hand of the surface-temperature gauge began to move; slowly, and then more rapidly, until the eyes could catch its creeping.

"Reduce to atmospheric speed," I ordered curtly, and glanced down

through a side port at one end of the long navigating room.

We were, at the moment, directly above the twilight belt. To my right, as I looked down, I could see a portion of the glistening antarctic ice cap. Here and there were the great flat lakes, almost seas, of the planet.

Our geographies of the Universe today do not show the topography of the Forgotten Planet; I might say, therefore, that the entire sphere was land area, with numerous great lakes embedded in its surface, together with many broad, very crooked rivers. As Ame Baove had reported, there were no mountains, and no high land.

"Altitude constant," I ordered. "Port three degrees. Stand by for further orders."

The earth seemed to whirl slowly beneath us. Great cities drifted astern, and I compared the scene below me with the great maps I took from our chart-case. The Control City should be just beyond the visible rim; well in the daylight area.

"Port five degrees," I said, and pressed the attention button to Barry's quarters.

"Mr. Barry, please call all men to quarters, including the off-duty watch, and then report to the navigating room. Mr. Eitel will be under my direct orders. We shall descend within the next few minutes."

"Very well, sir."

I pressed the attention button to Eitel's room.

"Mr. Eitel, please pick ten of your best men and have them report at the forward exit. Await me, with the men, at that place. I shall be with you as soon as I turn the command over to Mr. Barry. We are descending immediately."

"Right, sir!" said Eitel.

I TURNED from the microphone to find that Barry had just entered the navigating room.

"We will descend into the Great Court of the Control City, Mr. Barry," I said. "I have a mission here. I am sorry, but these are the only instructions I can leave you.

"I do not know how long I shall be gone from the ship, but if I do not return within three hours, depart without me, and report directly to Kellen of the Council. To him, and no other. Tell him, verbally, what took place. Should there be any concerted action against the *Tamon*, use your own judgment as to the action to be taken, remembering that the safety of the ship and its crew, and the report of the Council, are infinitely more important than my personal welfare. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Too damned clear."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Don't worry," I said lightly. "I'll be back well within the appointed time."

"I hope so. But there's something wrong as hell here. I'm talking now as man to man; not to my commanding officer. I've been watching below, and I have seen at least two spots where large numbers of our ships have been destroyed. The remaining ships bear their own damned emblem where the crest of the Alliance should be—and was. What does it mean?"

"It means," I said slowly, "that I shall have to rely upon every man and officer to forget himself and myself, and obey orders without hesitation and without flinching. The orders are not mine, but direct from the Council itself." I held out my hand to him—an ancient Earth gesture of greeting, good-will and farewell—and he shook it vigorously.

"God go with you," he said softly, and with a little nod of thanks I turned and quickly left the room.

EITEL, with his ten men, were waiting for me at the forward exit. The men fell back a few paces and came to attention; Eitel saluted smartly.

"We are ready, sir. What are your orders?"

"You are to guard this opening. Under no circumstances is anyone to enter save myself. I shall be gone not longer than three hours; if I am not back within that time, Mr. Barry has his orders. The exit will be sealed, and the *Tamon* will depart immediately, without me."

"Yes, sir. You will pardon me, but I gather that your mission is a dangerous one. May I not accompany you?"

I shook my head.

"I shall need you here."

"But, sir, they are very excited and angry; I have been watching them from the observation ports. And there is a vast crowd of them around the ship."

"I had expected that. I thank you for your concern, but I must go alone. Those are the orders. Will you unseal the exit?"

His "Yes, sir!" was brisk and efficient, but there was a worried frown on his features as he unlocked and released the switch that opened the exit.

The huge plug of metal, some ten feet in diameter, revolved swiftly and noiselessly, backing slowly in its fine threads into the interior of the ship, gripped by the ponderous gimbals which, as the last threads disengaged, swung the mighty disc to one side, like the door of some great safe.

"Remember your orders," I smiled, and with a little gesture to convey an assurance which I certainly did not feel, I strode through the circular opening out into the crowd. The heavy glass secondary door shot down behind me, and I was in the hands of the enemy.

THE first thing I observed was that my menore, which I had picked up on my way to the exit, was not functioning. Not a person in all that vast multitude wore a monore; the five black-robed dignataries who marched to meet me wore none.

Nothing could have showed more clearly that I was in for trouble. To invite a visitor, as Kellen had done, to remove his menore first, was, of course, a polite and courteous thing to do if one wished to communicate by speech; to remove the menore before greeting a visitor wearing one, was a tacit admission of rank enmity; a confession that one's thoughts were to be concealed.

My first impulse was to snatch off my own instrument and fling it in the solemn, ugly faces of the nearest of the five dignataries; I remembered Kellen's warning just in time. Quietly, I removed the metal circlet and tucked it under my arm, bowing slightly to the committee of five as I did so.

"I am Ja Ben," said the first of the five, with an evil grin. "You are the representative of the Council that we commanded to appear?"

"I am John Hanson, commander of the ship *Tamon* of the Special Patrol Service. I am here to represent the Central Council," I replied with dignity.

"As we commanded," grinned Ja Ben. "That is good. Follow us and you shall have the evidence you were promised."

Ja Ben led the way with two of his black-robed followers. The other two fell in behind me. A virtual prisoner, I marched between them, through the vast crowd that made way grudgingly to let us pass.

I HAVE seen the people of most of the planets of the known Universe. Many of them, to Earth notions, are odd. But these people, so much like us in many respects, were strangely repulsive.

Their heads, as Ame Baove had recorded, were not round like ours, but possessed a high bony crest that ran from between their lashless, browless eyes, down to the very nape of their necks. Their skin, even that covering their hairless heads, was a dull and papery white, like parchment, and their eyes were abnormally small, and nearly round. A hateful, ugly people, perpetually scowling, snarling; their

very voices resembled more the growl of wild beasts than the speech of intelligent beings.

Ja Ben led the way straight to the low but vast building of dun-colored stone that I knew was the administration building of the Control City. We marched up the broad, crowded steps, through the muttering, jeering multitude, into the building itself. The guards at the doors stood aside to let us through and the crowd at last was left behind.

A swift, cylindrical elevator shot us upward, into a great glass-walled laboratory, built like a sort of penthouse on the roof. Ja Ben walked quickly across the room towards a long, glass-topped table; the other four closed in on me silently but suggestively.

"That is unnecessary," I said quietly. "See, I am unarmed and completely in your power. I am here as an ambassador of the Central Council, not as a warrior."

"Which is as well for you," grinned Ja Ben. "What I have to show you, you can see quickly, and then depart."

From a great cabinet in one corner of the room he took a shining cylinder of dark red metal, and held it up before him, stroking its sleek sides with an affectionate hand.

"HERE it is," he said, chuckling. "The secret of our power. In here, safely imprisoned now, but capable of being released at our command, is death for every living thing upon any planet we choose to destroy." He replaced the great cylinder in the cabinet, and picked up in its stead a tiny vial of the same metal, no larger than my little finger, and not so long. "Here," he said, turning again towards me, "is the means of proving our power to you. Come closer!"

With my bodyguard of four watching every move, I approached.

Ja Ben selected a large hollow hemisphere of crystal glass and placed it upon a smooth sheet of flat glass. Next he picked a few blossoms from a bowl that stood, incongruously enough, on the table, and threw them under the glass hemisphere.

"Flora," he grinned.

Hurrying to the other end of the room, he reached into a large flat metal cage and brought forth three small rodent like animals, natives of that world. These he also tossed carelessly under the glass.

"Fauna," he grunted, and picked up the tiny metal vial.

One end of the vial unscrewed. He turned the cap gently, carefully, a strained, anxious look upon his face. My four guards watched him breathlessly, fearfully.

THE cap came loose at last, disclosing the end of the tube, sealed with a grayish substance that looked like wax. Very quickly Ja Ben rolled the little cylinder under the glass hemisphere, and picked up a beaker that had been bubbling gently on an electric plate close by. Swiftly he poured the thick contents of the beaker around the base of the glass bell. The stuff hardened almost instantly, forming an air-tight seal between the glass hemisphere and the flat plate of glass upon which it rested. Then, with an evil, triumphant smile, Ja Ben looked up.

"Flora," he repeated. *"Fauna.* And *death.* Watch! The little metal cylinder is plugged still, but in a moment that plug will disappear—simply a volatile solid, you understand. It is going rapidly . . rapidly . . . it is almost gone now! Watch. In an instant now . . . *ah!"*

I saw the gray substance that stopped the entrance of the little metal vial disappear. The rodents ran around and over it, trying to find a crevice by which they might escape. The flowers, bright and beautiful, lay untidily on the bottom of the glass prison.

Then, just as the last vestige of the gray plug vanished, an amazing, a terrible thing happened. At the mouth of the tiny metal vial a greenish cloud

appeared. I call it a cloud, but it was not that. It was solid, and it spread in every direction, sending out little needles that lashed about and ran together into a solid mass while millions of little needles reached out swiftly.

One of these little needles touched a scurrying animal. Instantly the tiny brute stiffened, and from his entire body the greenish needles spread swiftly. One of the flowers turned suddenly thick and pulpy with the soft green mass, then another, another of the rodents . . . *God!*

In the space of two heart beats, the entire hemisphere was filled with the green mass, that still moved and writhed and seemed to press against the glass sides as though the urge to expand was insistent, imperative. . . .

"WHAT is it?" I whispered, still staring at the thing.

"Death!" grunted Ja Ben, thrusting his hateful face close to mine, his tiny round eyes, with their lashless lids glinting. "Death, my friend. Go and tell your great Council of this death that we have created for every planet that will not obey us.

"We have gone back into the history of dealing death and have come back with a death such as the Universe has never known before!

"Here is a rapacious, deadly fungus we have been two centuries in developing. The spores contained in that tiny metal tube would be invisible to the naked eye—and yet given but a little time to grow, with air and vegetation and flesh to feed upon, and even that small capsule would wipe out a world. And in the cabinet,"—he pointed grinning triumphantly—"we have, ready for instant use, enough of the spores of this deadly fungas to wipe out all the worlds of your great Alliance.

"To wipe them out utterly!" he repeated, his voice shaking with a sort of frenzy now. "Every living thing upon their faces, wrapped in that thin, hungry green stuff you see there under that glass. All life wiped out; made uninhabitable so long as the Universe shall endure. And we—*we* shall be rulers, unquestioned, of that Universe. Tell your doddering Council *that!*" He leaned back against the table, panting with hate.

"I shall tell them all I have seen; all you have said," I nodded.

"You believe we have the power to do all this?"

"I do—God help me, and the Universe," I said solemnly.

THERE was no doubt in my mind. I could see all too clearly how well their plans had been laid; how quickly this hellish growth would strangle all life, once its spores began to develop.

The only possible chance was to get back to the Council and make my report, with all possible speed, so that every available armed ship of the universe might concentrate here, and wipe out these people before they had time to—

"I know what you are thinking, my friend," broke in Ja Ben mockingly. "You might as well have worn the menore! You would have the ships of the Alliance destroy us before we have time to act. We had foreseen that, and have provided for the possibility.

"As soon as you leave here, ships, provided with many tubes like the one just used for our little demonstration, will be dispersed in every direction. We shall be in constant communication with those ships, and at the least sign of hostility, they will be ordered to depart and spread their death upon every world they can reach. Some of them you may be able to locate and eliminate; a number of them are certain to elude capture in infinite space—and if only one, one lone ship, should escape, the doom of the Alliance and millions upon millions of people will be pronounced.

"I warn you, it will be better, much better, to bow to our wishes, and pay us the tribute we shall demand. Any attempt at resistance will precipitate

certain disaster for your Council and all the worlds the Council governs."

"At least, we would wipe you out first," I said hoarsely.

"True," nodded Ja Ben. "But the vengeance of our ships would be a terrible thing! You would not dare to take the chance!"

I stood there, staring at him in a sort of daze. What he had said was so true; terribly, damnably true.

If only—

THERE was but one chance I could see, and desperate as it was, I took it. Whirling the heavy metal ring of my menore in my hand, I sprang towards the table.

If I could break the sealed glass hemisphere, and loose the fungus upon its creators; deal to them the doom they had planned for the universe, then perhaps all might yet be well.

Ja Ben understood instantly what was in my mind. He and his four aides leaped between me and the table, their tiny round eyes blazing with anger. I struck one of the four viciously with the menore, and with a gasp he fell back and slumped to the floor.

Before I could break through the opening, however, Ja Ben struck me full in the face with his mighty fist; a blow that sent me, dazed and reeling, into a corner of the room. I brought up with a crash against the cabinet there, groped widly in an effort to steady myself, and fell to the floor. Almost before I struck, all four of them were upon me.

They hammered me viciously, shouted at me, cursed me in the universal tongue, but I paid no heed. I pretended to be unconscious, but my heart was beating high with sudden, glorious hope, and in my brain a terrible, merciless plan was forming.

When I had groped against the cabinet in an effort to regain my balance, my fingers had closed upon one of the little metal vials. As I fell, I covered that hand with my body and hastily hid the tiny tube in a deep pocket of my blue and silver Service uniform

SLOWLY, after a few seconds, I opened my eyes and looked up at them, helplessly.

"Go, now!" snarled Ja Ben, dragging me to my feet. "Go, and tell your Council we are more than a match for you—and for them." He thrust me reeling, towards his three assistants. "Take him to his ship, and send aid for Ife Rance, here." He glanced at the still unconscious figure of the victim of my menore, and then turned to me with a last warning.

"Remember, one thing more, my friend: you have disintegrator ray equipment upon your ship. You have the little atomic bombs that won for the Alliance the Second War of the Planets. I know that. But if you make the slightest effort to use them, I shall dispatch a supply of the green death to our ships, and they will depart upon their missions at once. You would take upon yourself a terrible responsibility by making the smallest hostile move.

"Go, now—and when you return, bring with you members of your great Council who will have the power to hear our demands, and see that they are obeyed. And do not keep us waiting over long, for we are an impatient race." He bowed, mockingly, and passed his left hand swiftly before his face, his people's sign of parting.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and, hemmed in by my three black-robed conductors, was hurried down the elevator and back through the jeering mob to my ship.

THE glass secondary door shot up to permit me to enter, and Eitel gripped my shoulder anxiously, his eyes smoldering angrily.

"You're hurt, sir!" he said in his odd, high-pitched voice, staring into my bruised face. "What—"

"It's nothing," I assured him. "Close the exit immediately; we depart at once."

"Yes, sir!" He closed the switch, and the great threaded plug swung gently on its gimbals and began to revolve, swiftly and silently. A little bell sounded sharply, and the great door ceased its motion. Eitel locked the switch and returned the key to his pocket.

"Good. All men are at their stations?" I asked briskly.

"Yes, sir! All except these ten, detailed to guard the exit."

"Have them report to their regular stations. Issue orders to the ray operators that they are to instantly, and without further orders, destroy any ship that may leave the surface of this planet. Have every atomic bomb crew ready for an instant and concentrated offensive directed at the Control City, but command them not to act under any circumstances unless I give the order. Is that clear, Mr. Eitel?"

"Yes, sir!"

I nodded, and turned away, making my way immediately to the navigating room.

"Mr. Barry," I said quickly and gravely, "I believe that the fate of the known Universe depends upon us at this moment. We will ascend vertically, at once—slowly—until we are just outside the envelope, maintaining only sufficient horizontal motion to keep us directly over the Control City. Will you give the necessary orders?"

"Immediately, sir!" He pressed the attention button to the operating room and spoke swiftly into the microphone; before he completed the order I had left.

WE were already ascending when I reached the port forward atomic bomb station. The man in charge, a Zenian, saluted with automatic precision and awaited orders.

"You have a bomb in readiness?" I asked, returning the salute.

"Those were my orders, sir."

"Correct. Remove it, please."

I waited impatiently while the crew removed the bomb from the releasing trap. It was withdrawn at last; a fish-shaped affair, very much like the ancient airplane bombs save that it was no larger than my two fists, placed one upon the other, and that it had four silvery wires running along its sides, from rounded nose to pointed tail, held at a distance from the body by a series of insulating struts.

"Now," I said, "how quickly can you put another object in the trap, re-seal the opening, and release the object?"

"While the Commander counts ten with reasonable speed," said the Zenian with pride. "We won first honors in the Special Patrol Service contests at the last Examination, the Commander may remember."

"I do remember. That is why I selected you for this duty."

With hands that trembled a little, I think, I drew forth the little vial of gleaming red metal, while the bombing crew watched me curiously.

"I shall unscrew the cap from this little vial," I explained, "and drop it immediately into the releasing trap. Re-seal the trap and release this object as quickly as it is possible to do so. If you can better the time you made to win the honors at the Examination—in God's name, do so!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the Zenian. He gave brisk orders to his crew, and each of the three men sprang alertly into position.

AS quickly as I could, I turned off the cap of the little metal vial and dropped it into the trap. The heavy plug, a tiny duplicate of the exit door, clicked shut upon it and spun, whining gently, into the opening. Something clicked sharply, and one of the crew dropped a bar into place. As it shot home, the Zenian in command of the crew pulled the release plunger.

"Done, sir!" he said proudly.

I did not reply. My eye fixed upon the observation tube that was following the tiny missile to the ground.

The Control City was directly below us. I lost sight of the vial almost in-

stantly, but the indicating cross-hairs showed me exactly where the vial would strike; at a point approximately half way between the edge of the city and the great squat pile of the administrating building, with its gleaming glass penthouse—the laboratory in which, only a few minutes before, I had witnessed the demonstration of the death which awaited the Universe.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "Smartly done, men!" I turned and hurried to the navigating room, where the most powerful of our television discs was located.

The disc was not as perfect as those we have to-day; it was hooded to keep out exterior light, which is not necessary with the later instruments, and it was more unwieldy. However, it did its work, and did it well, in the hands of an experienced operator.

With only a nod to Barry, I turned the range hand to maximum, and brought it swiftly to bear upon that portion of the city in which the little vial had fallen. As I drew the focusing lever towards me, the scene leaped at me through the clear, glowing glass disc.

FROTH! Green, billowing froth that grew and boiled and spread unceasingly. In places it reached high into the air, and it moved with an eager, inner life that was somehow terrible and revolting. I moved the range hand back, and the view seemed to drop away from me swiftly.

I could see the whole city now. All one side of it was covered with the spreading green stain that moved and flowed so swiftly. Thousands of tiny black figures were running in the streets, crowding away from the awful danger that menaced them.

The green patch spread more swiftly always. When I had first seen it, the edges were advancing as rapidly as a man could run; now they were fairly racing, and the speed grew constantly.

A ship, two of them, three of them, came darting from somewhere, towards the administration building, with its glass cupola. I held my breath as the deep, sudden humming from the *Tamon* told me that our rays were busy. Would they—

One of the enemy ships disappeared suddenly in a little cloud of dirty, heavy dust that settled swiftly. Another . . . and the third. Three little streaks of dust, falling, falling. . . .

A fourth ship, and a fifth came rushing up, their sides faintly glowing from the speed they had made. The green flood, thick and insistent, was racing up and over the administration building now. It reached the roof, ran swiftly. . .

The fourth ship shattered into dust. The fifth settled swiftly—and then that ship also disappeared, together with a corner of the building. Then the thick green stuff flowed over the whole building and there was nothing to be seen there but a mound of soft, flowing, gray-green stuff that rushed on now with the swiftness of the wind.

I LOOKED up, into Barry's face.

"You're ill!" he said quickly. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Yes," I said, forming the words with difficulty. "Give orders to ascend at emergency speed!"

For once my first officer hesitated. He glanced at the attraction meter and then turned to me again, wondering.

"At this height, sir, emergency speed will mean dangerous heating of the surface; perhaps—"

"I want it white hot, Mr. Barry. She is built to stand it. Emergency speed, please—immediately!"

"Right, sir!" he said briskly, and gave the order.

I felt my weight increase as the order was obeyed; gradually the familiar, uncomfortable feeling left me. Silently, Barry and I watched the big surface temperature gauge as it started to move. The heat inside became uncomfortable, grew intense. The sweat poured from us. In the operating

room, forward, I could see the men casting quick, wondering glances up at us through the heavy glass partition that lay between.

The thick, stubby red hand of the surface temperature gauge moved slowly but steadily towards the heavy red line that marked the tempertaure at which the outer shell of our hull would become incandescent. The hand was within three or four degrees of that mark when I gave Barry the order to arrest our motion.

When he had given the order, I turned to him and motioned towards the television disc.

"Look," I said.

HE looked, and when at last he tore his face away from the hood, he seemed ten years older.

"What is it?"he asked in a choked whisper. "Why—they're being wiped out; the whole of that world—"

"True. And some of the seeds of that terrible death might have drifted upward, and found a lodging place upon the surface of our ship. That is why I ordered the emergency speed while we were still within the atmospheric envelope, Barry. To burn away that contamination, if it existed. Now we are safe, unless—"

I pressed the attention button to the station of the chief of the ray operators.

"Your report," I ordered.

"Nine ships disintegrated, sir," he replied instantly. "Five before the city was destroyed; four later."

"You are certain that none escaped?"

"Positive, sir."

"Very good."

I turned to Barry, smiling.

"Point her nose for Zenia, Mr. Barry," I said. "As soon as it is feasible, resume emergency speed. There are some very anxious gentlemen there awaiting our report, and I dare not convey it except in person."

"Yes, sir!" said Barry crisply.

THIS, then, is the history of the Forgotten Planet. On the charts of the Universe it appears as an unnamed world. No ship is permitted to pass close enough to it so that its attraction is greater than that of the nearest other mass. A permanent outpost of fixed-station ships, with headquarters upon Jaron, the closest world, is maintained by the Council.

There are millions of people who might be greatly disturbed if they knew of this potential menace that lurks in the midst of our Universe, but they do not know. The wisdom of the Council made certain of that.

But, in order that in the ages to come there might be a record of this matter, I have been asked to prepare this document for the sealed archives of the Alliance. It had been a pleasant task; I have relived, for a little time, a part of my youth.

The work is done, now, and that is well. I am an old man, and weary. Sometimes I wish I might live to see the wonders that the next generation or so will witness, but my years are heavy upon me.

My work is done.

ASTOUNDING STORIES

Appears on Newsstands

THE FIRST THURSDAY IN EACH MONTH

"And I would have been the greatest man in the world."

The Power and the Glory

By Charles W. Diffin

THERE were papers on the desk, a litter of papers scrawled over, in the careless writing of indifferent students, with the symbols of chemistry and long mathematical computations. The man at the desk pushed them aside to rest his lean, lined face on one thin hand. The other arm, ending at the wrist, was on the desk before him.

Sadly, sternly, the old professor reveals to his brilliant pupil the greater path to glory.

Students of a great university had long since ceased to speculate about the missing hand. The result of an experiment, they knew—a hand that was a mass of lifeless cells, amputated quickly that the living arm might be saved—but that was some several years ago, ancient history to those who came and went through Professor Eddinger's class room.

And now Professor Eddinger was weary — weary and old, he told himself — as he closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the interminable papers and the stubby wrist that had ended forever his experiments and the delicate manipulations which only he could do.

He reached slowly for a buzzing phone, but his eyes brightened at the voice that came to him.

"I've got it—I've got it!" The words were almost incoherent. "This is Avery, Professor — Avery! You must come at once. You will share in it; I owe it all to you . . . you will be the first to see . . . I am sending a taxi for you—"

Professor Eddinger's tired eyes crinkled to a smile. Enthusiasm like this was rare among his youngsters. But Avery—with the face of a poet, a dreamer's eyes and the mind of a scientist—good boy, Avery!—a long time since he had seen him—had him in his own laboratory for two years. . . .

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"No—no!" said a voice; "I can't tell you—it is too big—greater than the induction motor—greater than the electric light—it is the greatest thing in the world. The taxi should be there now—you must come—"

A knock at the office door where a voice said, "Car for Professor Eddinger," confirmed the excited words.

"I'll come," said the Professor, "right away."

HE pondered, as the car whirled him across the city, on what this greatest thing in the world might be. And he hoped with gentle skepticism that the enthusiasm was warranted. A young man opened the car door as they stopped. His face was flushed, Eddinger noted, hair pushed back in disarray, his shirt torn open at the throat.

"Wait here," he told the driver and took the Professor by the arm to hurry him into a dilapidated building.

"Not much of a laboratory," he said, "but we'll have better, you and I; we'll have better—"

The room seemed bare with its meager equipment, but it was neat, as became the best student of Professor Eddinger. Rows of reagent bottles stood on the shelves, but the tables were a litter of misplaced instruments and broken glassware where trembling hands had fumbled in heedless excitement.

"Glad to see you again, Avery." The gentle voice of Professor Eddinger had lost its tired tone. "It's been two years you've been working, I judge. Now what is this great discovery, boy? What have you found?"

The younger man, in whose face the color came and went, and whose eyes were shining from dark hollows that marked long days and sleepless nights, still clung to the other's arm.

"It's real," he said; "it's great! It means fortune and fame, and you're in on that, Professor. The old master," he said and clapped a hand affectionately upon a thin shoulder; "I owe it all to you. And now I have—I have learned. . . . No, you shall see for yourself. Wait—"

HE crossed quickly to a table. On it was an apparatus; the eyes of the older man widened as he saw it. It was intricate—a maze of tubing! There was a glass bulb above—the generator of a cathode ray, obviously—and electro-magnets below and on each side. Beneath was a crude sphere of heavy lead—a retort, it might be—and from this there passed two massive, insulated cables. The understanding eyes of the Professor followed them, one to a terminal on a great insulating block upon the floor, the other to a similarly protected terminal of carbon some feet above it in the air.

The trembling fingers of the young man made some few adjustments, then he left the instrument to take his place by an electric switch. "Stand back," he warned, and closed the switch.

There was a gentle hissing from within glass tubes, the faint glow of a blue-green light. And that was all, until — with a crash like the ripping crackle of lightning, a white flame arced between the terminals of the heavy cables. It hissed ceaselessly through the air where now the tang of ozone was apparent. The carbon blocks glowed with a brilliant incandescence when the flame ceased with the motion of a hand where Avery pulled a switch.

The man's voice was quiet now. "You do not know, yet, what you have seen, but there was a tremendous potential there—an amperage · can't measure with my limited facilities." He waved a deprecating hand about the ill-furnished laboratory. "But you have seen—" His voice trembled and failed at the forming of the words.

"—The disintegration of the atom," said Professor Eddinger quietly, "and the release of power unlimited. Did you use thorium?" he inquired.

The other looked at him in amazement. Then: "I should have known you would understand," he said humbly. "And you know what it means"—again his voice rose—"power without end to do the work of the world—great vessels driven a lifetime on a mere ounce of matter—a revolution in transportation—in living. . . ." He paused. "The liberation of mankind," he added, and his voice was reverent. "This will do the work of the world; it will make a new heaven and a new earth! Oh, I have dreamed dreams," he exclaimed, "I have seen visions. And it has been given to me—me!—to liberate man from the curse of Adam . . . the sweat of his brow. . . . I can't realize it even yet. I—I am not worthy. . . ."

HE raised his eyes slowly in the silence to gaze in wondering astonishment at the older man. There was no answering light, no exaltation on the lined face. Only sadness in the tired eyes that looked at him and through him as if focused upon something in a dim future—or past.

"Don't you see?" asked the wondering man. "The freedom of men—the liberation of a race. No more poverty, no endless, grinding labor." His young eyes, too, were looking into the future, a future of blinding light. "Culture," he said, "instead of heart-breaking toil, a chance to grow mentally, spiritually; it is another world, a new life—" And again he asked: "Surely, you see?"

"I see," said the other; "I see—plainly."

"The new world," said Avery. "It—it dazzles me; it rings like music in my ears."

"I see no new world," was the slow response.

The young face was plainly perplexed. "Don't you believe?" he stammered. "After you have seen . . . I thought *you* would have the vision, would help me emancipate the world, save it—" His voice failed.

"Men have a way of crucifying their saviors," said the tired voice.

The inventor was suddenly indignant. "You are blind," he said harshly; "it is too big for you. And I would have had you stand beside me in the great work. . . . I shall announce it alone. . . . There will be laboratories—enormous!—and factories. My invention will be perfected, simplified, compressed. A generator will be made—thousands of horsepower to do the work of a city, free thousands of men—made so small you can hold it in one hand."

The sensitive face was proudly alight, proud and a trifle arrogant. The exaltation of his coming power was strong upon him.

"Yes," said Professor Eddinger, "in one hand." And he raised his right arm that he might see where the end of a sleeve was empty.

"I am sorry," said the inventor abruptly; "I didn't mean . . . but you will excuse me now; there is so much to be done—" But the thin figure of Professor Eddinger had crossed to the far table to examine the apparatus there.

"Crude," he said beneath his breath, "crude—but efficient!"

IN the silence a rat had appeared in the distant corner. The Professor nodded as he saw it. The animal stopped as the man's eyes came upon it; then sat squirrellike on one of the shelves as it ate a crumb of food. Some morsel from a hurried lunch of Avery's, the Professor reflected—poor Avery! Yes, there was much to be done.

He spoke as much to himself as to the man who was now beside him. "It enters here," he said and peered downward toward the lead bulb. He placed a finger on the side of the metal. "About here, I should think. . . . Have you a drill? And a bit of quartz?"

The inventor's eyes were puzzled, but the assurance of his old instructor claimed obedience. He produced a small drill and a fragment like broken glass. And he started visibly as the one hand worked awkwardly to make a small hole in the side of the lead. But he withdrew his own restraining hand, and he watched in mystified silence while the quartz was fitted to make a tiny window and the thin figure stooped to sight as if aiming the opening toward a far corner where a brown rat sat upright in earnest munching of a dry crust.

The Professor drew Avery with him as he retreated noiselessly from the instrument. "Will you close the switch," he whispered.

The young man hesitated, bewildered, at this unexpected demonstration, and the Professor himself reached with his one hand for the black lever. Again the arc crashed into life, to hold for a brief instant until Professor Eddinger opened the switch.

"Well," demanded Avery, "what's all the show? Do you think you are teaching me anything—about my own instrument?" There was hurt pride and jealous resentment in his voice.

"See," said Professor Eddinger quietly. And his one thin hand pointed to a far shelf, where, in the shadow, was a huddle of brown fur and a bit of crust. It fell as they watched, and the "plop" of the soft body upon the floor sounded loud in the silent room.

"The law of compensation," said Professor Eddinger. "Two sides to the medal! Darkness and light—good and evil—life . . . and death!"

THE young man was stammering. "What do you mean?—a death ray evolved?" And: "What of it?" he demanded; "what of it? What's that got to do with it?"

"A death ray," the other agreed. "You have dreamed, Avery—one must in order to create—but it is only a dream. You dreamed of life—a fuller life—for the world, but you would have given them, as you have just seen, death."

The face of Avery was white as wax; his eyes glared savagely from dark hollows.

"A rat!" he protested. "You have killed a rat . . and you say—you say—" He raised one trembling hand to his lips to hold them from forming the unspeakable words.

"A rat," said the Professor—"or a man . . . or a million men."

"We will control it."

"All men will have it—the best and the worst . . . and there is no defence."

"It will free the world—"

"It will destroy it."

"No!"—and the white-faced man was shouting now—"you don't understand—you can't see—"

The lean figure of the scientist straightened to its full height. His eyes met those of the younger man, silent now before him, but Avery knew the eyes never saw him; they were looking far off, following the wings of thought. In the stillness the man's words came harsh and commanding—

"Do you see the cities," he said, "crumbling to ruins under the cold stars? The fields? They are rank with wild growth, torn and gullied by the waters; a desolate land where animals prowl. And the people—the people!—wandering bands, lower, as the years drag on, than the beasts themselves; the children dying, forgotten, in the forgotten lands; a people to whom the progress of our civilization is one with the ages past, for whom there is again the slow, toiling road toward the light.

"And somewhere, perhaps, a conquering race, the most brutal and callous of mankind, rioting in their sense of power and dragging themselves down to oblivion. . . ."

HIS gaze came slowly back to the room and the figure of the man still fighting for his dream.

"They would not," said Avery hoarsely; "they'd use it for good."

"Would they?" asked Professor Eddinger. He spoke simply as one stating simple facts. "I love my fellow men," he said, "and I killed them in thousands in the last war—I, and my science, and my poison gas."

The figure of Avery slumped suddenly upon a chair; his face was buried in his hands. "And I would have been," he groaned, "the greatest man in the world."

"You shall be greater," said the Professor, "though only we shall know it —you and I. . . . You will save the world—from itself."

The figure, bowed and sunken in the chair, made no move; the man was heedless of the kindly hand upon his shoulder. His voice, when he spoke, was that of one afar off, speaking out of a great loneliness. "You don't understand," he said dully; "you can't—"

But Professor Eddinger, a cog in the wheels of a great educational machine, glanced at the watch on his wrist. Again his thin shoulders were stooped, his voice tired. "My classes," he said. "I must be going. . . ."

IN the gathering dusk Professor Eddinger locked carefully the door of his office. He crossed beyond his desk and fumbled with his one hand for his keys.

There was a cabinet to be opened, and he stared long in the dim light at the object he withdrew. He looked approvingly at the exquisite workmanship of an instrument where a generator of the cathode ray and an intricate maze of tubing surmounted electro-magnets and a round lead bulb. There were terminals for attaching heavy cables; it was a beautiful thing. . . . His useless arm moved to bring an imaginary hand before the window of quartz in the lead sphere.

"Power," he whispered and repeated Avery's words; "power, to build a city —or destroy a civilization . . . and I hold it in one hand."

He replaced the apparatus in the safety of its case. "The saviors of mankind!" he said, and his tone was harsh and bitter.

But a smile, whimsical, kindly, crinkled his tired eyes as he turned to his desk and its usual litter of examination papers.

"It is something, Avery," he whispered to that distant man, "to belong in so distinguished a group."

A STAR THAT "BREATHES"

BETA CEPHEI, the mysterious Milky Way star which expands and contracts as though it were breathing, at last has a biography.

A summary of known facts concerning the star, interpreted in the light of recent observations at the Lick Observatory at the University of California was completed recently by H. S. Mendenhall, graduate student.

Mendenhall's interpretations were said to lend weight to the theory that Beta Cephei is contracting and expanding once in every four and one-half hours. This is such a terrific rate of speed from a terrestrial point of view that it appears to be moving toward and away from the earth at a velocity reaching a maximum of about nine and one-half miles per second.

Beta Cephei is a variable star in the Constellation Cepheus. It is best visible in the northern sky during July or August. Its distance from the earth is estimated roughly at 2,000,000,000,000,000 miles, and Mendenhall estimates its diameter at almost 2,000,000 miles, more than twice that of the sun.

In addition to the apparent velocity caused by contraction and expansion of its surface five times a day, Beta Cephei seems to have another motion. This was said by Mendenhall to be a rotation around some other star in a period of 20 years. Velocity of this rotation is something over three miles a second.

Variable stars are of particular interest to astronomers because the light from them pulsates regularly, flaring and dying as though fuel were replenished at regular intervals. The rate of this pulsation has been found to be a measure to the candle power of the star. Its distance then can be determined by contrasting its actual candle power with the apparent magnitude as seen from the earth.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Bell. He'd known this man before. A Secret Service man—one of the seven who had vanished.

Murder Madness

PART THREE OF A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Murray Leinster

SEVEN United States Secret Service men have disappeared in South America. Another is found—a screaming homicidal maniac. It is rumored that they are victims of a diabolical poison which produces "murder madness."

More and more South Americans are stricken with the horrible "murder madness" that lies in The Master's fearful poison. And Bell is their one last hope as he fights to stem the swiftly rising tide of a continent's utter enslavement.

Charley Bell of the "Trade" — a secret service organization which does not officially exist—discovers that a sinister system of slavery is flourishing in South America, headed by a mysterious man known only as The Master. This slavery is accomplished by means of a poison which causes its victims to experience a horrible writhing of the hands, followed by a madness to do murder, two weeks after it is taken.

The victims get relief only with an antidote supplied through Ribiera, The Master's Chief Deputy; but in the antidote there is more of the poison, which again in two weeks will take effect. And so it is that a person who once receives the poison is forever enslaved.

Ribiera kidnaps Paula Canalejas, daughter of a Brazilian cabinet min-

ister who, on becoming a victim, has killed himself, preferring death to "murder madness." Bell rescues Paula, and they flee from Ribiera in a plane. They find The Master's hidden jungle stronghold, and Bell destroys it with a bomb attack from the air. As he is getting away his motor quits. Paula jumps for her life, and shortly afterwards Bell follows, drifting straight down towards his enemies below.

CHAPTER XI

BELL was falling head-first when the 'chute opened, and the jerk was terrific, the more so as he had counted not the customary ten, but fifteen before pulling out the ring. But very suddenly he seemed to be floating down with an amazing gentleness, with the ruddy blossom of a parachute swaying against a background of lustrous stars very far indeed over his head. Below him were masses of smoke and at least one huge dancing mass of flame, where the storage tank for airplane gas had exploded. It was unlikely in the extreme, he saw now, that anyone under that canopy of smoke could look up to see plane or parachute against the sky.

Clumsily enough, dangling as he was, Bell twisted about to look for Paula. Sheer panic came to him before he saw her a little above him but a long distance off. She looked horribly alone with the glare of the fires upon her parachute, and smoke that trailed away into darkness below her. She was farther from the flames than Bell, too. The light upon her was dimmer. And Bell cursed that he had stayed in the plane to make sure it would dive clear of her before he stepped off himself.

THE glow on the blossom of silk above her faded out. The sky still glared behind, but a thick and acrid fog enveloped Bell as he descended. Still straining his eyes hopelessly, he crossed his feet and waited.

Branches reached up and lashed at him. Vines scraped against his sides. He was hurled against a tree trunk with stunning force, and rebounded, and swung clear, and then dangled halfway between earth and the jungle roof. It was minutes before his head cleared, and then he felt at once despairing and a fool. Dangling in his parachute harness when Paula needed him.

The light in the sky behind him penetrated even the jungle growth as a faint luminosity. Presently he writhed to a position in which he could strike a match. A thick, matted mass of climbing vines swung from the upper branches not a yard from his fingertips. Bell cursed again, frantically, and clutched at it wildly. Presently his absurd kickings set him to swaying. He redoubled his efforts and increased the arc in which he swung. But it was a long time before his fingers closed upon leaves which came away in his grasp, and longer still before he caught hold of a wrist-thick liana which oozed sticky sap upon his hands.

But he clung desperately, and presently got his whole weight on it. He unsnapped the parachute and partly let himself down, partly slid, and partly tumbled to the solid earth below.

He had barely reached it when, muffled and many times reechoed among the tree trunks, he heard two shots. He cursed, and sprang toward the sound, plunging headlong into underbrush that strove to tear the flesh from his bones. He fought madly, savagely, fiercely.

HE heard two more shots. He fought the jungle in the darkness like a madman, ploughing insanely through masses of creepers that should have been parted by a machete, and which would have been much more easily slipped through by separating them, but which he strove to penetrate by sheer strength.

And then he heard two shots again. Bell stopped short and swore disgustedly.

"What a fool I am!" he growled.

"She's telling me where she is, and I—"

He drew one of the weapons that seemed to bulge in every pocket of his flying suit and fired two shots in the air in reply. A single one answered him.

From that time Bell moved more sanely. The jungle is not designed, apparently, for men to travel in. It is assuredly not intended for them to travel in by night, and especially it is not planned, by whoever planned it, for a man to penetrate without either machete or lights.

As nearly as he could estimate it afterward, it took Bell over an hour to cover one mile in the blackness under the jungle roof. Once he blundered into fire-ants. They were somnolent in the darkness, but one hand stung as if in white-hot metal as he went on. And thorns tore at him. The heavy flying suit protected him somewhat, but after the first hundred yards he blundered on almost blindly, with his arms across his face, stopping now and then to try to orient himself. Three times he fired in the air, and three times an answering shot came instantly, to guide him.

AND then a voice called in the blackness, and he ploughed toward it, and it called again, and again, and at last he struck a match with trembling fingers and saw her, dangling as he had dangled, some fifteen feet from the ground. She smiled waveringly, with a little gasp of relief, and he heard something go slithering away, very furtively.

She clung to him desperately when he had gotten her down to solid earth. But he was savage.

"Those shots—though I'm glad you fired them—may have been a tip-off to the town. We've got to keep moving, Paula."

Her breath was coming quickly.

"They could trail us, Charles. By daylight we might not leave signs, but forcing our way through the night. . . ."

"Right, as usual," admitted Bell. "How about shells? Did you use all you had?"

"Nearly. But I was afraid, Charles."

Bell felt in his pockets. Half a box. Perhaps twenty-five shells. With the town nearby and almost certainly having heard their signals to each other. Black rage invaded Bell. They would be hunted for, of course. Dogs, perhaps, would trail them. And the thing would end when they were at bay, ringed about by The Master's slaves, with twenty-five shells only to expend.

The dim little glow in the sky between the jungle leaves kept up. It was bright, and slowly growing brighter. There was a sudden flickering and even the jungle grew light for an instant. A few seconds later there was a heavy concussion.

"Something else went up then," growled Bell. "It's some satisfaction, anyway, to know I did a lot of damage."

AND then, quite abruptly, there was an obscure murmuring sound. It grew stronger, and stronger still. If Bell had been aloft, he would have seen the planes from The Master's hangars being rushed out of their shelters. One of the long row of buildings had caught. And the plateau of Cuyaba is very, very far from civilization. Tools, and even dynamos and engines, could be brought toilsomely to it, but the task would be terrific. Buildings would be made from materials on the spot, even the shelters for the planes. It would be much more practical to carry the parts for a saw mill and saw out the lumber on the spot than to attempt to freight roofing materials and the like to Cuyaba. So that the structures Bell had seen in the wing lights' glow were of wood, and inflammable. The powerhouse that lighted the landing field was already ablaze. The smaller shacks of the laborers perhaps would not be burnt down, but the elaborate depot for communication by plane and wireless was rapidly being destroyed. The reserve of gasoline had

gone up in smoke almost at the beginning, and in spreading out had extended the disaster to nearly all the compact nerve-center of the whole conspiracy.

Presently the droning noise was tumultuous. Every plane in a condition to fly was out on the landing field, now brightly lighted by the burning buildings all about. There was frantic, hectic activity everywhere. The secretaries of The Master were rescuing what records they could, and growing cold with terror. In the confusion of spreading flames and the noise of roaring conflagrations the stopping of the motor up aloft had passed unnoticed. In the headquarters of The Master there was panic. An attack had been made upon The Master. A person who could not be one of his slaves had found his stronghold and attacked it terribly. And if one man knew that location and dared attack it, then. . . .

THE hold of The Master upon all his slaves was based on one fact and its corollary. The fact was, that those who had been given his poison would go murder mad without its antidote. The corollary was that those who obeyed him would be given that antidote and be safe. True, the antidote was but a temporary one, and mixed with it for administration was a further dosage of the poison itself. But the whole power of The Master was based on his slaves' belief that as long as they obeyed him abjectly there would be no failure of the antidote's supply. And Bell had given that belief a sudden and horrible shock.

Orders came from one frightened man, who cursed much more from terror than from rage. Ribiera had advised him. To do him justice, Ribiera felt less fear than most. Nephew to The Master, and destined successor to The Master's power, Ribiera dared not revolt, but at least he had little fear of punishment for incompetence. It was his advice that set the many aircraft motors warming up. It was his direction that assorted out the brainwork staff. And Ribiera himself curtly took control, indifferently abandoned the enslaved workers to the madness that would come upon them, and took wing in the last of a stream of roaring things that swept upward above the smoke and flame and vanished in the sky.

BELL and Paula were huddled in between the buttress roots of a jungle giant, protected on three sides by the monster uprearings of solid wood, and Bell was absorbedly feeding a tiny smudge fire. The smoke was thick and choking, but it did keep off the plague of insects which make jungle travel much less than the romantic adventure it is pictured. Bell heard the heavy, thunderous buzzing from the town change timbre suddenly. A single note of it grew loud and soared overhead.

He stared up instinctively, but saw nothing but leaves and branches and many climbing things above him, dimly lighted by the smoky little blaze. The roaring overhead went on, and dimmed. A second roaring came from the town and rose to a monstrous growling and diminished. A third did likewise, and a fourth.

At stated, even intervals the planes at headquarters of The Master took off from the landing field, ringed about with blazing buildings, and plunged through the darkness in a straight line. The steadier droning from the town grew lighter as the jungles echoed for many miles with the sounds of aircraft motors overhead.

AT last a single plane rose upward and thundered over the jungle roof. It went away, and away. . . . The town was silent, then, and only a faint and dwindling murmur came from the line of aircraft headed south.

"They've deserted the town, by God!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming. "Scared off!"

"And—and we—" said Paula, gazing at him.

"You can bet that every man who could crowd into a plane did so," said Bell grimly. "Those that couldn't, if they have any brains, will be trying to make it some other way to where they can subject themselves to one of The Master's deputies and have a little longer time of sanity. The poor devils that are left—well—they'll be *camaradas, peons,* laborers, without the intelligence to know what they can do. They'll wait patiently for their masters to come back. And presently their hands will writhe. . . . And the town will be a hell."

"Then they won't be looking for us?"

Bell considered. And suddenly he laughed.

"If the fire has burned out before dawn," he said coldly, "I'll go looking for them. It's going to be cold-blooded, and it's going to be rather pitiful, I think, but there's nothing else to do. You try to get some rest. You'll need it."

And for all the rest of the dark hours he crouched in the little angle formed by the roots of the forest giant, and kept a thickly smoking little fire going, and listened to the noises of the jungle all about him.

IT was more than a mile back to the town. It was nearer two. But it was vastly less difficult to force a way through the thick growths by daylight, even though then it was not easy. With machetes, of course, Bell and Paula would have had no trouble, but theirs had been left in the plane. Bell made a huge club and battered openings by sheer strength where it was necessary. Sweat streamed down his face before he had covered five hundred yards, but then something occurred to him and he went more easily. If there were any of the intelligent class of The Master's subjects left in the little settlement, he wanted to allow time enough for them to start their flight. He wanted to find the place empty of all but laborers, who would be accustomed to obey any man who spoke arrogantly and in the manner of a deputy of The Master. Yet he did not want to wait too long. Panic spreads among the *camarada* class as swiftly as among more intelligent folk, and it is even more blind and hysterical.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before they emerged upon a cleared field where brightly blooming plants grew hugely. Bell regarded them grimly.

"These," he observed, "will be The Master's stock."

Paula touched his arm.

"I have heard," she said, and shuddered, "that the men who gather the plants that go to make the poisons of the *Indios* do not—do not dare to sleep near the fresh-picked plants. They say that the odor is dangerous, even the perfume of the blossoms."

"Very probably," said Bell. "I wish I could destroy the damned things. But since we can't, why, we'll go around the edge of the field."

HE went upwind, skirting the edge of the planted things. A path showed, winding over half-heartedly cleared ground. He followed it, with Paula close behind him. Smoke still curled heavily upward from the heaps of ashes which he reached first of all. He looked upon them with an unpleasant satisfaction. He had to pick his way between still smoking heaps of embers to reach the huts about which laborers stood listlessly, not working because not ordered to work, not yet frightened because not yet realizing fully the catastrophe that had come upon them.

He was moving toward them, deliberately adopting an air of suppressed rage, when a voice called whiningly.

"Senhor! Senhor!" And then pleadingly, in Portuguese, "I have news for The Master! I have news for The Master!"

Bell jerked his head about. Bars of thick wood, cemented into heavy timbers at top and bottom. A building that was solid wall on three sides, and the fourth was bars. A white man in it,

unshaven, haggard, ragged, filthy. And on the floor of the cage. . . .

There had been another such cage on a *fazenda* back toward Rio. Bell had looked into it, and had shot the gibbering Thing that had been its occupant, as an act of pure mercy. But this man had been through horrors and yet was sane.

"Don't look," said Bell sharply to Paula. He went close.

The figure pressed against the bars, whining. And suddenly it stopped its fawning.

"The devil!" said the white man in the cage. "What in hell are you doing here, Bell? Has that fiend caught you too?"

"OH, my God!" gasped Bell. He went white with a cold rage. He'd known this man before. A Secret Service man—one of the seven who had vanished. "How's this place opened? I'll let you out."

"It may be dangerous," said the white man with a ghastly grin. "I'm one of The Master's little victims. I've been trying to work a little game in hopes of getting within arm's reach of him. How'd you get here? Has he got you too?"

"I burned the damned town last night," snarled Bell, "and crashed up after it. Where's that door?"

He found it, a solid mass of planks with a log bar fitted in such a way that it could not possibly be opened from within. He dragged it wide. The white man came out, holding to his self-control with an obvious effort.

"I want to dance and sing because I'm out of there," he told Bell queerly, "but I know you've done me no good. I've been fed The Master's little medicine. I've been in that cage for weeks."

Bell, quivering with rage, handed him a revolver.

"I'm going to get some supplies and stuff and try to make it to civilization," he said shortly. "If you want to help. . . ."

"Hell, yes," said the white man drearily. "I might as well. Number One-Fourteen was here. . . . He's The Master's little pet, now. Turned traitor. Report it, if you ever get out."

"No," said Bell briefly. "He didn't turn." He told in a very few words of the finding of the body of a man who had fallen or been thrown from a plane into the jungle.

THEY were moving toward the rows of still standing shacks, then, and faces were beginning to turn toward them, and there was a little stir of apathetic puzzlement at sight of the white man who had been set free.

That white man looked suddenly at Paula, and then at Bell.

"I've been turned into a beast," he said wryly. "Look here, Bell. There were as many as ten and fifteen of us in that cage at one time—men the deputies sent up for the purpose. We were allowed to go mad, one and two at a time, for the edification of the populace, to keep the *camaradas* scared. And those of us who weren't going mad just then used to have to band together and kill them. That cage has been the most awful hell on earth that any devil ever contrived. They put three women in there once, with their hands already writhing. . . . Ugh! . . .

Bell's face was cold and hard as if carved from marble.

"I haven't lived through it," said the white man harshly, "by being soft. And I've got less than no time to live—sane, anyhow. I was thinking of shooting you in the back, because the young lady—"

He laughed as Bell's revolver muzzle stirred.

"I'm telling you," said the white man in ghastly merriment, "because I thought—I thought One-Fourteen had set me the example of ditching the Service for his own life. But now it's different."

HE pointed.

"There's a launch in that house, with one of these outboard motors. It

was used to keep up communication with the boat gangs that sweat the heavy supplies up the river. It'll float in three inches of water, and you can pole it where the water's too shallow to let the propeller turn. This rabble will mob you if you try to take it, because it'll have taken them just about this long to realize that they're deserted. They'll think you are a deputy, at least, to have dared release me. I'm going to convince them of it, and use this gun to give you a start. I give you two hours. It ought to be enough. And then. . . ."

Bell nodded.

"I'm not Service," he said curtly, "but I'll see it's known."

The white man laughed again.

"'Some sigh for the glories of this world, and some for a prophet's paradise to come,'" he quoted derisively. "I thought I was hard, Bell, but I find I prefer to have my record clean in the Service—where nobody will ever see it—than to take what pleasure I might snatch before I die. Queer, isn't it? Old Omar was wrong. Now watch me bluff, flinging away the cash for credit of doubtful value, and all for the rumble of a distant drum—which will be muted!"

THEY were surrounded by swarming, fawning, frightened *camarada*s who implored the Senhor to tell them if he were a deputy of The Master, and if he were here to make sure nothing evil befell them. They worked for The Master, and they desired nothing save to labor all their lives for The Master, only—only—The Master would allow no evil to befall them?

The white man waved his arms grandiloquently.

"The Senhor you behold," he proclaimed in the barbarous Portugese of the hinterland of Brazil, "has released me from the cage in which you saw me. He is the deputy of The Master himself, and is enraged because the landing lights on the field were not burning, so that his airplane fell down into the jungle. He bears news of great value from me to The Master, which will make me finally a sub-deputy of The Master. And I have a revolver, as you see, with which I could kill him, but he dares not permit me to die, since I have given him news for The Master. I shall wait here and he will go and send back an airplane with the grace of The Master for me and for all of you."

Bell snarled an assent, in the arrogant fashion of the deputies of The Master. He waited furiously while the Service man argued eloquently and fluently. He fingered his revolver suggestively when a wave of panic swept over the swarming mob for no especial reason. And then he watched grimly while the light little metal-bottomed boat was carried to the water's edge and loaded with food, and fuel, and arms, and ammunition, and even mosquito bars.

The white man grinned queerly at Bell as he extended his hand in a last handshake.

"'I, who am about to die, salute you!'" he said mockingly. "Isn't this a hell of a world, Bell? I'm sure we could design a better one in some ways."

BELL felt a horrible, a ghastly shock. The hand that gripped his was writhing in his grasp.

"Quite so," said the white man. "It started about five minutes ago. In theory, I've about forty-eight hours. Actually, I don't dare wait that long, if I'm to die like a white man. And a lingering vanity insists on that. I hope you get out, Bell. . . . And if you want to do me a favor,"—he grinned again, mirthlessly—"you might see that The Master and as many of his deputies as you can manage join me in hell at the earliest possible moment. I shan't mind so much if I can watch them."

He put his hands quickly in his pockets as the little outboard motor caught and the launch went on downriver. He did not even look after them.

The last Bell saw of him he was swaggering back up the little hillside above the river edge, surrounded by scared inhabitants of the workmen's shacks, and scoffing in a superior fashion at their fears.

CHAPTER XII

IT took Bell just eight days to reach the Paraguay, and those eight days were like an age-long nightmare of toil and discomfort and more than a little danger. The launch was headed downstream, of course, and with the current behind it, it made good time. But the distances of Brazil are infinite, and the jungles of Brazil are malevolent, and the route down the Rio Laurenço was designed by the architect of hell. *Raudales* lay in wait to destroy the little boat. Insects swarmed about to destroy its voyagers. And the jungle loomed above them, passively malignant, and waited for them to die.

And as if physical sufferings were not enough, Bell saw Paula wilt and grow pale. All the way down the river they passed little clearings at nearly equal distances. And men came trembling out of the little houses upon those *fazendas* and fawned upon the Senhor who was in the launch that had come from up-river and so must be in the service of The Master himself. The clearings and the tiny houses had been placed upon the river for the service of the terribly laboring boat gangs who brought the heavier supplies up the river to The Master's central depot. Men at these clearings had been enslaved and ordered to remain at their posts, serving all those upon the business of The Master. They fawned abjectly upon Bell, because he was of *os gentes* and so presumably was empowered, as The Master had empowered his more intelligent subjects, to exact the most degraded of submission from all beneath him in the horrible conspiracy. Once, indeed, Bell was humbly implored by a panic stricken man to administer "the grace of The Master" to a moody and irritable child of twelve or so.

"She sees the red spots, Senhor. It is the first sign. And I have served The Master faithfully. . . ."

AND Bell could do nothing. He went on savagely. And once he passed a gang of *camaradas* laboring to get heavily loaded dugouts up a fiendish *raudal*. They had ropes out and were hauling at them from the bank, while some of their number were breast-deep in the rushing water, pushing the dugouts against the stream.

"They're headed for the plantation," said Bell grimly, "and they'll need the grace of The Master by the time they get there. And it's abandoned. But if I tell them. . . ."

Men with no hope at all are not to be trusted. Not when they are mixtures of three or more races—white and black and red—and steeped in ignorance and superstition and, moreover, long subject to such masters as these men had had. Bell had to think of Paula.

He could have landed and haughtily ordered them to float or even carry the light boat to the calmer waters below. They would have obeyed and cringed before him. But he shot the rapids from above, with the little motor roaring past rocks and walls of jungle beside the foaming water, at a speed that chilled his blood.

PAULA said nothing. She was white and listless. Bell, himself, was being preyed upon by a bitter blend of horror and a deep-seated rage that consumed him like a fever. He had fever itself, of course. He was taking, and forcing Paula to take, five grains of quinine a day. It had been included among his stores as a matter of course by those who had loaded his boat. And with the fever working in his brain he found himself holding long, imaginary conversations, in which one part of his brain reproached the other part for having destroyed the plantation of The

Master. The laborers upon that plantation had been abandoned to the murder madness because of his deed. The caretakers of the tiny *fazenda* on the river bank were now ignored. Bell felt himself a murderer because he had caused The Master's deputies to cast them off in a callous indifference to their inevitable fate.

He suffered the tortures of the damned, and grew morose and bitter, and could only escape that self torture by coddling his hatred of Ribiera and The Master. He imagined torments to be inflicted upon them which would adequately repay them for their crimes, and racked his feverish brain for memories of the appalling atrocities which can be committed upon the human body without destroying its capacity to suffer.

It was not normal. It was not sane. But it filled Bell's mind and somehow kept him from suicide during the horrible passage of the river. He hardly dared speak to Paula. There was a time when he counted the days since he had been a guest at Ribiera's estate outside of Rio, and frenziedly persuaded himself that he saw red spots before his eyes and soon would have the murder madness come upon him. And then he thought of the supplies in Ribiera's plane, in which they had escaped from Rio. They had eaten that food.

IT was almost unconsciously, then, that he saw the narrow water on which the launch floated valiantly grow wider day by day. When at last it debouched suddenly into a vast stream whereon a clumsy steamer plied beneath a self made cloud of smoke, he stared dully at it for minutes before he realized.

"Paula," he said suddenly, and listened in amazement to his voice. It was hoarse and harsh and croaking. "Paula, we've made it. This must be the Paraguay."

She roused herself and looked about like a person waking from a lethargic sleep. And then her lips quivered, and she tried to speak and could not, and tears fell silently from her eyes, and all at once she was sobbing bitterly.

That sign of the terrific strain she had been under served more than anything else to jolt Bell out of his abnormal state of mind. He moved over to her and clumsily put his arm about her, and comforted her as best he could. And she sat sobbing with her head on his shoulder, gasping in a form of hysterical relief, until the engine behind them sputtered, and coughed, and died.

When Bell looked, the last drop of gasoline was gone. But the motor had served its purpose. It had run manfully on an almost infinitesimal consumption of gasoline for eight days. It had not missed an explosion save when its wiring was wetted by spray. And now. . . .

BELL hauled the engine inboard and got out the oars from under the seats. He got the little boat out to mid-stream, and they floated down until a village of squalid huts appeared on the eastern bank. He landed, there, and with much bargaining and a haughty demeanor disposed of the boat to the skipper of a *batelao* in exchange for passage down-river as far as Corumba. The rate was outrageously high. But he had little currency with him and dared go no farther on a vessel which carried a boat of The Master's ownership conspicuously towed behind.

At Corumba he purchased clothes less obviously of *os gentes*, both for himself and for Paula, and that same afternoon was able to arrange for their passage to Asunción as deck passengers on a river steamer going downstream.

It was as two peasants, then, that they rode in sweltering heat amid a swarming and odorous mass of fellow humanity downstream. But it was a curious relief, in some ways. The people about them were gross and unwashed and stupid, but they were human. There was none of that diabolical feeling of terror all about. There were no

strained, fear haunted faces upon the deck reserved for deck passengers and other cattle. The talk was ungrammatical and literal and of the earth. The women were stolid-faced and reserved. But when the long rows of hammocks were slung out in the open air, in the casual fashion of sleeping arrangements in the back-country of all South America, it was blessedly peaceful to realize that the folk who snored so lustily were merely human; human animals, it might be, with no thought above their *farinha* and *feijos* on the morrow, but human.

AND the second day they passed the old fort at Coimbra, and went on. The passage into Paraguayan territory was signalized by an elaborate customs inspection, and three days later Asunción itself displayed its red-tiled roofs and adobe walls upon the shore.

Bell had felt some confidence in his ability to pass muster with his Spanish, though his Portuguese was limited, and it was a shock when the captain of the steamer summoned him to his cabin with a gesture, before the steamer docked. Bell left Paula among the other deck passengers and went with the peasant's air of suspicious humility into the captain's quarters. But the captain's pose of grandeur vanished at once when the door closed.

"Senor," said the steamer captain humbly, "I have not spoken to you before. I knew you would not wish it. But tell me, senor! Have you any news of what The Master plans?"

Bell's eyes flickered, at the same time that a cold apprehension filled him.

"Why do you speak to me of The Master?" he demanded sharply.

The steamer captain stammered. The man was plainly frightened at Bell's tone. Bell relaxed, his flash of panic for Paula gone.

"I know," said the captain imploringly, "that the great *fazenda* has been deserted. On my last trip down, senor, I brought many of the high deputies who had been there. They warned me not to speak, senor, but I saw that you were not what you seemed, and I thought you might be going about to see who obeyed The Master's orders. . . ."

BELL nodded.

"That is my mission," he said curtly. "Do not speak of it further—not even to the deputy in Asunción."

The captain stammered again.

"But I must see the Senor Francia," he said humbly. "I report to him after every trip, and if he thought that I did not report all that I learn. . . ."

"It is my order," snapped Bell angrily. "If he reproaches you, say that one who has orders from The Master himself gave them to you. And do not speak of the destruction of the *fazenda*. I am searching especially for the man who caused it. And—wait! I will take your name, and you shall give me—say—a thousand pesos. I had need of money to bribe a fool I could not waste time on, up-country. It will be returned to you."

And again the captain stammered, but Bell stared at him haughtily, and he knelt abjectly before the ship's safe.

ASUNCIÓN, as everybody knows, is a city of sixty thousand people, and the capital of a republic which enjoyed the rule of a family of hereditary dictators for sixty years; which rule ended in a war wherein four-fifths of the population was wiped out. And since that beginning it has averaged eight revolutions to Mexico's three, has had the joy of knowing seven separate presidents in five years—none of them elected—and now boasts a population approximately two-thirds illegitimate and full of pride in its intellectual and artistic tastes.

Bell and Paula made their way along the cobbled streets away from the river, surrounded by other similarly peasant-seeming folk. Bell told her curtly what had happened with the steamer captain.

"It's the devil," he said coldly, "be-

cause this whole republic is under The Master's thumb. Except among the peasants we can count on nearly everybody being on the lookout for us, if they so much as suspect we're alive. And they may because I burned their damned *fazenda*. So. . . ."

Paula smiled at him, rather wanly.

"What are you going to do, Charles?"

"Get a boat," said Bell curtly. "One with three or four men, if I can. If I can buy it with the skipper's money, I will. But I can't take you to go bargaining. It would look suspicious."

They had reached the central plaza of the town. The market swarmed with brown skinned folk and seemed to overflow with fruits. A man was unconcernedly shoveling oranges out of a cart with a shovel, as if they had been so much coal. A market woman as unconcernedly dropped some of the same golden fruit within a small pen where a piglet awaited a purchaser. To the left, there were rows of unshaded stalls where the infinitely delicate handmade Paraguayan lace was exposed for sale.

"I—think," said Paula, "I think I will go in the cathedral. I will be very devout, Charles, and you will find me there when you return. I will be safe there, certainly."

HE walked with her across the crowded plaza. He should have known that your peasant does not stride with head up, but regarding the ground. That a man who works heavily droops his shoulders with weariness at the end of a day. And especially he should have realized that Paraguay is not, strictly speaking, a Latin-American nation. It is Latin-Indian, in which the population graduates very definitely from a sub-stratum of nearly or quite pure Indian race to an aristocracy of nearly or quite pure Spanish descent, and that the color of a man's skin fixes his place in society. Both Bell and Paula were too light of skin for the peasant's clothes they wore. They aroused curiosity at once. If it was not an active curiosity, it was nevertheless curiosity of a sort.

But Bell left her in the shadowy, cool interior of the cathedral which seems so pitifully small to be the center of religion for a nation. He saw her move toward one of the little candle-lit niches in the wall and fall quite simply on her knees there.

And he moved off, to wander aimlessly down to the river shore and stare about and presently begin a desultory conversation with sleepy boatmen.

IT was three hours and more before he returned to the Cathedral, and Paula was talking to someone. More, talking to a woman in the most discreet of mantilla'd church-going costumes. Paula saw him in the doorway, and uttered a little cry of relief. She came hurrying to him.

"Charles! I have found a friend! Isabella Ybarra. We were schoolmates in the United States and she has just come back from Paris! So you see, she cannot—"

"I see," said Bell very quietly.

Paula was speaking swiftly and very softly.

"We went to school together, Charles. I trust her. You must trust her also. There is no danger, this time. Isabella has never even heard of The Master. So you see. . ."

"I see that you need someone you can trust," said Bell grimly. "*I* found that the captain of the steamer had gone to The Master's deputy here. While I was talking to some boatmen a warning was given to look out for a man and woman, together, who may try to buy a boat. We're described, and only the fact that I was alone kept me from being suspected. Police, soldiers—everybody is looking out for us. Paraguay's under The Master's thumb more completely than any other nation on the continent."

The figure to which Paula had been talking was moving slowly toward them. A smiling, brown-eyed face twinkled at them.

"You must be Charles!" said a warm and cluckling voice. "Paula has raved, Senor. Now I am going to take her off in my carriage. She is my maid. And you will follow the carriage on foot and I will have the major-domo let you in the servants' entrance, and the three of us will conspire."

IT was incongruous to hear the English of a girl's finishing school from the mantilla'd young woman who beamed mischievously at him. She had the delighted air of one aiding a romance. It was doubly incongruous because of the dark and shadowy Cathedral in which they were, and the raucous noises of the market in the plaza without. Bell had a sense of utter unreality as Isabella's good humored voice went on:

"Do you remember, Paula, the time the French teacher caught us in the pantry? I shall feel just like that time."

"This is dangerous," said Bell, steadily, "and it is very serious indeed."

"Pooh!" said Isabella comfortably. "Paula, you didn't even know I was married! A whole year and a half! And he's a darling, really. I'm the Senora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga, if you please! Bow gracefully!" She chuckled. "Jaime came all the way to Rio to meet me last month. I'm wild about him, Paula. . . . But come on! Follow me humbly, like a nice little *mestizo* girl who wants to be my maid, and I'll let you ride with the *cochero* and Charles shall follow behind us."

She swept out of the Cathedral with the air of a grande dame suppressing a giggle, and Paula went humbly behind her.

And Bell trudged through the dust and the blistering sun while the highly polished carriage jolted over cobble stones and the youthful Senora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga beamed blissfully at the universe which did not realise that she was a conspirator, and Paula sat modestly beside the brown skinned *cochero*.

IT was not a long ride nor a long walk, though the sun was insufferable. The capital of Paraguay is not large. It is a sleepy, somnolent little town in which the most pretentious building was begun as the Presidential Palace and wound us as the home of a bank. But there are bullet marks on the façade of the *Museo Nacionál*, and there is still an empty pedestal here and there throughout the city where the heroes of last year's revolution, in bronze, have been pulled down and the heroes of this year's uprising of the people have not yet been set up. Red tiled roofs give the city color, and the varying shades of its populace give it variety, and the fact that below the whiter class of inhabitants *Guarani* is spoken instead of Spanish adds to the individuality of its effect.

But the house into which the carriage turned could have been built in Rio or Buenos Aires without comment on its architecture. It had the outer bleakness of most private homes of South America, but if it was huge and its windows were barred, the *patio* into which Bell was ushered by a bewildered and suspicious major-domo made up in color and in charm for all that the exterior lacked.

A fountain played amid flowers, and macaws and parrots and myriad other caged birds hung in their cages about the colonnade around the court, and Bell found Paula being introduced to a pale young man in the stiff collar and unspeakably formal morning clothes of the South American who is of the upper class.

"Jaime," said Isabella, beaming. "And this is Charles, whom Paula is to marry! It is romantic! It is fascinating! And I depend on you to give him clothes so that all our servants won't stare goggle-eyed at him, and I am going to take Paula off at once and dress her! They are our guests! And, Jaime, you must threaten all the servants terribly so they will keep it very secret—that we have two such terrible people with us."

PAULA smiled at Bell, and he saw that she felt utterly safe and wholly at peace. Something was hammering at Bell's brain, warning him, and he could not understand what it was. But he exchanged the decorous limp handshake which is conventional south of Panama, and followed his unsmiling host to rooms where a servant laid out a bewildering assortment of garments. They ware all rather formal, the sort of clothing that is held to be fitting for a man of position where Spanish is the official if not the common tongue.

His host retired, without words, and Bell came out later to find him sipping moodily at a drink, waiting for him. He wiped his forehead.

"Be seated, Senor," he said heavily, "until the ladies join us."

He wiped his forehead again and watched somberly while Bell poured out a drink.

"Isabella. . . ." He seemed to find it difficult to speak. "She has told me a little, but there has been no time for more than a little: I do not wish to have her tell me too much. She does not understand. She was educated in North America, where customs are different. She demands that I assist you and the senorita—it is the senorita?"

Bell stiffened. In all Spanish America the conventions are strict. For a man and woman to travel together, even perforce and for a short distance, automatically damns the woman.

"Go on," said Bell grimly.

His host was very pale indeed.

"She demands that I assist you and the senorita to escape the police and the government. Provided that you do not tell me who you are, I will attempt it. But—"

"I wonder," said Bell quietly, "if you have ever seen red spots dancing before your eyes.

His host went utterly livid.

ZULOAGA looked down at his hands, as if expecting unguessable things of them. And then he shrugged, and said harshly:

"I have, Senor. So you see that Isabella, who does not know, is asking me to risk, not only, my life, but her honor."

Bell said nothing for a moment. He was a little pale.

"And your honor?" he asked quietly.

The pallor on the face of the Senor Jaime Zuloaga was horrible. He tried to speak, and could not. He stood up, and managed to say:

"So much I will risk, because you have been my guest. Until to-morrow morning you are safe, unless the Senor Francia has his spies within my own house. I—I will attempt, even to procure a boat. But—"

Something made Bell turn. The major-domo was moving quickly out of sight. Like a flash Bell was upon him, and like a flash a knife came out.

Bell's host gasped. The fact that his servant had spied was more than obvious, and he had spoke treason against The Master. He leaned against the table, sick and trembling and mumbling of despair, while there were crashes in the room into which Bell had plunged, while bodies thrashed about on the floor, and while stertorous breathing grew less, and stopped. . . .

Bell came back, breathing hard. The front of his coat was slashed open.

"He's dead," he said harshly. "He'd have reported what you said, so I killed him. . . And now we've got to do something with his body."

He helped in the horrible task, while his host grew more and more shaken. No other servants came near. And Bell could almost read the thoughts that went through Zuloaga's brain. One servant had spied, to report his treason. And that meant assassination for himself, as the least of punishments, and for his wife. . . ."

But there would be no punishment if he went first to the deputy and said that Bell had killed the major-domo.

Bell left the house before dusk, desperately determined to steal a craft of some sort, return for Paula, and get away from Asunción before dawn.

He returned after an hour. In the morning a man would be found bound and gagged, with five hundred pesos stuffed into his pockets. His boat would have vanished.

But there was a commotion before the house where Paula waited fearfully. A carriage stood there, with a company of mounted soldiers about it. Someone was being put into it. As Bell broke into a run toward the house the carriage started up and the soldiers trotted after it.

Paula was taken.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT night Bell turned burglar. To attempt a rescue of Paula was simply out of the question. He was entirely aware that he would be expected to do just such a thing, and that it would be adequately guarded against. Therefore he prepared for a much more desperate enterprise by burglarizing a bookstore in the particularly neat method in which members of The Trade are instructed. The method was invented by a member of The Trade who was an ex-cabinet maker, and who perished disreputably. He killed a certain courier of a certain foreign government, thereby preventing a minor war and irritating two governments excessively, and was hanged.

The method, of course, is simplicity itself. One removes the small nails which hold the molding of a door panel in place. The molding comes out. So does the panel. One enters through the panel, commits one's burglary, and comes out, replacing the molding and the nails with reasonable care. Depending upon the care with which the replacing is done, the means of entrance is more or less undiscoverable. But it is usually used when it is not intended that the burglary ever be discussed.

Bell abstracted two books, wrapping paper and twine. He departed, using great care. He walked three miles out of town and to the banks of the Paraguay. There he carefully saturated the pages of both books in water, carefully keeping the bindings from being wetted. Then he tore one book to pieces, saving the leaves and inserting them between the leaves of the other book. Then, with a brazil nut candle for illumination, he began to write.

YOU see, when two thoroughly wetted pieces of paper are placed one above the other with a hard surface such as the cover of another book under them, you can write upon the top one with a stick. The writing will show dark against the gray of the saturated paper. You then remove the top sheet and find the writing reproduced on the bottom sheet. And then you can dry the second sheet and find the marking vanished—until it is wetted again. It is, in fact, a method of water-marking paper. And it is the simplest of all methods of invisible writing.

Bell wrote grimly for hours. The book he had chosen was an old one, an ancient copy of one of Lope de Vega's plays, and the pages were wrinkled and yellow from age alone. When, by dawn, the last page was dried out, there was no sign that anything other than antiquity had affected the paper. And Bell wrapped it carefully, and addressed it to an elderly senora of literary tastes in San Juan, Porto Rico, and enclosed an affectionate letter to his very dear aunt, and signed it with an entirely improbable name.

It was mailed before sunrise, the necessary stamps having been filched from the burglarized bookstore and the price thereof being carefully inserted in the till. Bell had made a complete and painstaking report of every fact he had himself come upon in the matter of The Master and his slaves, and appended to it a copy of the report of the dead Secret Service operative Number One-Fourteen. He destroyed that after copying it. And he concluded that since he had been given dismissal by Jamison in Rio, he considered himself at liberty to take whatever steps he saw fit. And since the Senhorina Paula

Canalejas had been kidnapped by agents of The Master, he intended to take steps which might possibly bring about her safety, but would almost certainly cause his death.

The report should at least be of assistance if the Trade set to work to combat The Master. Bell had no information whatever about that still mysterious and still more horrible person himself. But what he knew about The Master's agents he sent to a lady in Porto Rico who has an astonishly large number of far ranging nephews. And then Bell got himself adequately shaved, bought a hearty breakfast, and, after one or two heartening drinks, was driven grandly to the residence of the Senor Francia, deputy of The Master for the republic of Paraguay.

THE servants who admitted him gazed blankly when he gave his name. A door was hastily closed behind him. He was ushered into an elaborate reception room and, after an agitated pause, no less than six separate frock-coated persons appeared and pointed large revolvers at him while a seventh searched him exhaustively. Bell submitted amusedly.

"And now," he said dryly, "I suppose the Senor Francis will receive me?"

There was more agitation. The six men remained, with their weapons pointed at him. The seventh departed, and Bell re-dressed himself in a leisurely fashion.

Ten minutes later a slender, dark skinned man with impeccably waxed moustaches entered, regarded Bell with an entirely impersonal interest, took one of the revolvers from one of the six frock-coated gentlemen, and seated himself comfortably. He waved his hand and they filed uneasily from the room. So far, not one word had been spoken.

BELL retrieved his cigarette case and lighted up with every appearance of ease.

"I have come," he said casually, "to request that I be sent to The Master. I believe that he is anxious to meet me."

The dark eyes scrutinized him coldly. Then Francia smiled.

"*Pero si*," he said negligently, "he is very anxious to see you. I suppose you know what fate awaits you?"

His smile was amiable and apparently quite friendly, but Bell shrugged.

"I suppose," he said dryly, "he wants to converse with me. I have been his most successful opponent to date, I think."

Francia smiled again. It was curious how his smile, which at first seemed so genuine and so friendly, became unspeakably unpleasant on its repetition.

"Yes." Francia seemed to debate some matter of no great importance. "You have been very annoying, Senor Bell. The Senhor Ribiera asked that you be sent to him. It was his intention to execute you, privately. He described a rather amusing method to me. And I must confess that you have annoyed me, likewise. Since the Cuyaba plantation was destroyed my subjects have been much upset. They have been frightened, and even stubborn. Only last week"—he smiled pleasantly, and the effect was horrible—"only last week I desired the society of a lady who is my subject. And her husband considered that, since the *fazenda* was destroyed, The Master would be powerless to extend his grace before long, in any event. So he shot his wife and himself. It annoyed me enough to make me feel that it would be a pleasure to kill you."

HE raised the revolver meditatively.

"Well?" said Bell coldly.

Francia lowered the weapon and laughed.

"Oh, I shall not do it. I think The Master would be displeased. You seem to have the type of courage he most desires in his deputies. And it may yet be that I shall greet you as my fellow deputy or perhaps my fellow viceroy. So I shall send you to him. I would

say that you have about an even chance of dying very unpleasantly or of being a deputy. Therefore I offer you such courtesies as I may."

Bell puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm about out of cigarettes," he said mildly.

"They shall be supplied. And—er—if you would desire feminine society, I will have some of my pretty subjects. . . ."

"No," said Bell bluntly. "I would like to speak to the Senhorina Canalejas, though."

Francia chuckled.

"She left for Buenos Aires last night. The Senhor Ribiera sent a most impatient message for her to be sent on at once. I regretted it, but he had The Master's authority. I thought her charming, myself."

The skin about Bell's knuckles was white. His hands had clenched savagely.

"In that event," he said coldly, "the only other courtesy I would ask is that of following her as soon as possible."

Francia rose languidly. The revolver dangled by his side, but his grip upon it was firm. He smiled at Bell with the same effect of a horrible, ghastly geniality.

"Within the hour, Senor," he said urbanely. "With the guard I shall place over you it is no harm, I am sure, to observe that The Master is at his retreat in Punta Arenas. You will go there to-morrow, as I go to-night."

He moved toward the door, and smiled again, and added pleasantly:

"The Senhorina was delivered to the Senhor Ribiera this morning."

MATTERS moved swiftly after that. A servant brought cigarettes and a tray of liquors—which Bell did not touch. There was the sound of movement, the scurrying, furtive haste which seems always to imply a desperate sort of fear. Bell waited in a terrible calmness, while rage hammered at his temples.

Then the clattering of horses' hoofs outside. A carriage was being brought. Soldiers came in and a man beckoned curtly. Bell stuffed his pockets with smokes and followed languidly. He was realizing that there was little pretense of secrecy about the power of The Master's deputy here. Police and soldiers. . . . But Paraguay, of all the nations of the southern continent, has learned a certain calm realism about governmental matters.

The man who has power is obeyed. The man who has not power is not obeyed. Titles are of little importance, though it is the custom for the man with the actual power eventually to assume the official rank of authority. Since the President in Asunción was no more than a figurehead who called anxiously upon the Senor Francia every morning for instructions concerning the management of the nation, Francia indifferently ignored him whenever he chose and gave orders directly. There would be very little surprise and no disorder whatever when The Master proclaimed Paraguay a viceroyalty of his intended empire.

THE carriage went smartly through the cobbled streets with a cavalry escort all about it. An officer sat opposite Bell with his hand on his revolver.

"I am receiving at least the honors of royalty," Bell commented coldly to him, in Spanish.

"Senor," said the officer harshly, "this is the state in which the deputies of The Master were escorted."

He watched Bell heavily, but with the desperate intentness of a man who knows no excuses will be received if his prisoner escapes.

Out of the town to a flying field, where a multi-engined plane was warming up. It was one of the ships that had been at The Master's *fazenda* of Cuyaba, one of the ships that had fled from the burning plantation. Bell was ushered into it with a ceremonious suspicion. Almost immediately he was handcuffed to his seat. Two men took

their place behind him. The big ship rolled forward, lifted, steadied, and after a single circling set out to the southeast for Buenos Aires.

THE whole performance had been run off with the smoothly oiled precision of an iron discipline exercised upon men in the grip of deadly fear.

"One man, at least," reflected Bell grimly, "has some qualities that fit him for his job."

And then, for hour after hour, the big ship went steadily southeast. It flew over Paraguayan territory for two hours, soaring high over the Lago Ypoa and on over the swampy country that extends to the Argentine border. It ignored that border and all customs formalities. It went on, through long hours of flight, while mountains rose before it. It rose over those mountains and passed over the first railroad line—the first real sign of civilization since leaving Asunción—at Mercedes, and reached the Uruguay river where the Mirinjay joins it. It went roaring on down above the valley of the Rio Uruguay for long and tedious hours more. At about noon, lunch was produced. The two men who guarded Bell ate. Then, with drawn revolvers, they unlocked his handcuffs and offered him food.

HE ate, of exactly those foods he had seen them eat. He submitted indifferently to the re-application of his fetters. He had reached a state which was curiously emotionless. If Paula had been turned over to Ribiera that morning, Paula was dead. And just as there is a state of grief which stuns the mind past the realization of its loss, so there is a condition of hatred which leads to an enormous calmness and an unnatural absence of any tremor. Bell had reached that state. The instinct of self-preservation had gone lax. Where a man normally thinks first, if unconsciously, of the protection of his body from injury or pain, Bell had come to think first, and with the same terrible clarity, of the accomplishment of revenge.

He would accept The Master's terms, if The Master offered them. He would become The Master's subject, accepting the poison of madness without a qualm. He would act and speak and think as a subject of The Master, until his opportunity came. And then. . . .

His absolute calmness would have deceived most men. It may have deceived his guards. Time passed. The Rio de la Plata spread out widely below the roaring multi-engined plane and the vast expanse of buildings which is Buenos Aires appeared far ahead in the gathering dusk. Little twinkling lights blinked into being upon the water and the earth far away. Then one of the two guards touched Bell on the shoulder.

"Senor," he said sharply above the motors' muffled roar, "we shall land. A car will draw up beside the plane. There will be no customs inspection. That has been arranged for. You can have no hope of escape. I ask you if you will go quietly into the car?"

"Why not?" asked Bell evenly. "I went to Senor Francia of my own accord."

THE guard leaned back. The city of Buenos Aires spread out below them. The tumbled, congested old business quarter glittered in all its offices, and the broad Avenida de Mayo cut its way as a straight slash of glittering light through the section of the city to eastward. By contrast, from above, the far-flung suburbs seemed dark and somber.

The big plane roared above the city, settling slowly; banked steeply and circled upon its farther side, and dipped down toward what seemed an absurdly small area, which sprang into a pinkish glow on their descent. That area spread out as the descent continued, though, and was a wide and level field when the ship flattened out and checked and lumbered to a stop.

A glistening black car came swiftly, humming into place alongside almost before the clumsy aircraft ceased to roll. Its door opened. Two men got out and waited. The hangars were quite two hundred yards away, and Bell saw the glitter of weapons held inconspicuously but quite ready.

He stepped out of the cabin of the plane with a revolver muzzle pressing into his spine. Other revolver muzzles pressed sharply into his sides as he reached earth.

Smiling faintly, he took four steps, clambered up into the glistening black car, and settled down comfortably into the seat. The two men who had waited by the car followed him. The door closed, and Bell was in a padded silence that was acutely uncomfortable for a moment. A dome light glowed brightly, however, and he lighted nearly the last of the cigarettes from Asunción with every appearance of composure as the car started off with a lurch.

THE windows were blank. Thick, upholstered padding covered the spaces where openings should have been, and there was only the muffled vibration of the motor and the occasional curiously distinct noise of a flexing spring.

"Just as a matter of curiosity," said Bell mildly, "what is the excuse given on the flying field for this performance? Or is the entire staff subject to The Master?"

Two revolvers were bearing steadily upon him and the two men watched him with the unwavering attention of men whose lives depend upon their vigilance.

"You, Senor," said one of them without expression or a smile, "are the corpse of a prominent politician who died yesterday at his country home."

And then for half an hour or more the car drove swiftly, and stopped, and drove swiftly forward again as if in traffic. Then there were many turns, and then a slow and cautious traverse of a relatively few feet. It stopped, and then the engine vibration ceased.

"I advise you, Senor," said the same man who had spoken before, and in the same emotionless voice, "not to have hope of escape in the moment of alighting. We are in an enclosed court and there are two gates locked behind us."

Bell shrugged as there was the clatter of a lock operating. The door swung wide.

HE stepped down into a courtyard surrounded by nearly bare walls. It had once been the *patio* of a private home of some charm. Now, however, it was bleak and empty. A few discouraged flowers grew weedily in one corner. The glow of light in the sky overhead assured Bell that he was in the very heart of Buenos Aires, but only the most subdued of rumbles spoke of the activity and the traffic of the city going on without.

"This way," said the man with the expressionless voice.

The other man followed. The chauffeur of the car stood aside as if some formality required him neither to start the motor or return to his seat until Bell was clear of the courtyard.

Through a heavy timber door. Along a passageway with the odor of neglect. Up stairs which once had been impressive and ornamental. Into a room without windows.

"You will have an interview with the Senorita Canalejas in five minutes," said the emotionless voice.

The door closed, while Bell found every separate muscle in his body draw taut. And while his brain at first was dazed with incredulous relief, then it went dark with a new and ghastly terror.

"They know *yagué*," he heard himself saying coldly, "which makes any person obey any command. They may know other and more hellish ones yet."

HE fought for self control, which meant the ability to conceal absolutely any form of shock that might await him. That one was in store he

was certain. He paced grimly the length of the room and back again. . . .

Something on the carpet caught his eye. A bit of string. He stared at it incredulously. The end was tied into a curious and an individual knot, which looked like it might be the pastime of a sailor, and which looked like it ought to be fairly easy to tie. But it was one of those knots which wandering men sometimes tie absent mindedly in the presence of stirring events. It was the recognition-knot of the Trade, one of those signs by which men may know each other in strange and peculiar situations. And there were many other knots tied along the trailing length of the string. It seemed as if some nervous and distraught prisoner in this room might have toyed abstractedly with a bit of cord.

Only, Bell drew it through his fingers. Double knot, single knot, double knot. . . . They spelled out letters in the entirely simple Morse code of the telegrapher, if one noticed.

"RBRA GN ON PLA HRE ST TGT J."

Your old-time telegrapher uses many abbreviations. Your short-wave fan uses more. Mostly they are made by a simple omission of vowels in normal English words. And when the recognition sign at the beginning was considered, the apparently cryptic letters leaped into meaning.

"RiBeRA GoNe ON PauLA HeRe SiT TiGhT Jamison."

When the door opened again and a terribly pale Paula was ushered in, Bell gave no sign of surprise. He simply took her in his arms and kissed her, holding her very, very close.

CHAPTER XIV

PAULA remained in the room with Bell for perhaps twenty minutes, and Bell had the feeling of eyes upon them and of ears listening to their every word. In their first embrace, in fact, he murmured a warning in her ear and she gasped a little whispered word of comprehension. But it was at least a relief to be sure that she was alive and yet unharmed. Francia had been in error when he told Bell of Paula's delivery to the Brazilian to be enslaved or killed as Ribiera found most amusing. Or perhaps, of course, Francia had merely wanted to cause Bell all possible discomfort.

It was clear, however, blessedly clear and evident, that Paula's pallor was due to nothing more than terror—a terror which was now redoubled because Bell was in The Master's toils with her. Forgetting his warning, she whispered to him desperately that he must try to escape, somehow, before The Master's poison was administered to him. Outside, he might do something to release her. Here, a prisoner, he was helpless.

Bell soothed her, not daring either to confess the plan he had formed of a feigned submission in order to wreak revenge, or to offer encouragement because of the message knotted in the piece of string by Jamison. And because of that caution she came to look at him with a queer doubt, and presently with a terrible quiet grief.

"Charles—you—you have been poisoned like the rest?"

THE feeling of watching eyes and listening ears was strong. Bell had a part to play, and the necessity for playing that part was the greater because now he was forced to hope. He hesitated, torn between the need to play his rôle for the invisible eavesdroppers and the desire to spare Paula.

Her hand closed convulsively upon his.

"V-very well, Charles," she said quietly, though her lips quivered. "If—if you are going to serve The Master, I—I will serve him too, if he will let me stay always near you. But if he—will not, then I can always—die."

Bell groaned. And the door opened silently, and there were men standing without. An emotionless voice said:

"Senorita, the Senor Ortiz will interview the Senor Bell."

"I'm coming," said Paula quietly.

She went, walking steadily. Two men detached themselves from the group about the door and followed her. The others waited for Bell. And Bell clenched his hands and squared his shoulders and marched grimly with them.

AGAIN long passages, descending to what must have been a good deal below the surface of the earth. And then a massive door was opened, and light shone through, and Bell found himself standing on a rug of the thickest possible pile in a room of quite barbaric luxury, and facing a desk from which a young man was rising to greet him. This young man was no older than Bell himself, and he greeted Bell in a manner in which mockery was entirely absent, but in which defiance was peculiarly strong. A bulky, round shouldered figure wrote laboriously at a smaller desk to one side.

"Senor Bell," said the young man bitterly, "I do not ask you to shake hands with me. I am Julio Ortiz, the son of the man you befriended upon the steamer *Almirante Gomez*. I am also, by the command of The Master, your jailer. Will you be seated?"

Bell's eyes flickered. The older Ortiz had died by his own hand in the first stages of the murder madness The Master's poison produced. He had died gladly and, in Bell's view, very gallantly. And yet his son. . . But of course The Master's deputies made a point of enslaving whole families when it was at all possible. It gave a stronger hold upon each member.

"I beg of you," said young Ortiz bitterly, "to accept my invitation. I wish to offer you a much qualified friendship, which I expect you to refuse."

Bell sat down and crossed his knees. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully, thinking swiftly.

"I remember, and admired, your father," he said slowly. "I think that any man who died as bravely as he did is to be envied."

THE younger Ortiz had reseated himself as Bell sat down, and now he fingered nervously, wretchedly, the objects on his desk. A penholder broke between his fingers and he flung it irritably into the wastebasket.

"You understand," he said harshly, "the obligations upon me. I am the subject of The Master. You will realize that if you desire to escape, I cannot permit it. But you did my father a very great kindness. Much of it I was able to discover from persons on the boat. More, from the wireless operator who is also the subject of The Master. You were not acting, Senor, as a secret service operative in your attempt to help my father. You bore yourself as a very honorable gentleman. I wish to thank you."

"I imagine," said Bell dryly, "that anyone would have done what I did."

He seemed to be quite at ease, but he was very tense indeed. The bulky, round shouldered figure at the other desk was writing busily with a very scratchy pen. It was an abominable pen. Its sputtering was loud enough to be noticeable under any circumstances, but Bell was unusually alert, just now, and suddenly he added still more drily:

"Helping a man in trouble is quite natural. One always gets it back. It's a sort of dealing with the future in which there is a profit on every trade."

He put the slightest emphasis on the last word and waited, looking at young Ortiz, but listening with all his soul to the scratching of the pen. And that scratching sound ceased abruptly. The pen seemed to write smoothly all of an instant. Bell drew a deep breath of satisfaction. In the Trade, when in doubt, one should use the word "Trade" in one's first remark to the other man. Then the other man will ask your trade, and you reply impossibly. It is then up to the other man to speak frankly, first. But circumstances alter even recognition-signs.

Ortiz had not noticed any by-play, of course. It would have been rather ex-

traordinary if he had. A pen that scratches so that the sound is Morse code for "Bell, play up. J." is just unlikely enough to avoid all notice.

ORTIZ drummed upon the desk. "Now, Senor, what can I do that will serve you? I cannot release you. You know that. I am not the deputy here. There has been a set-back to The Master's plans and all the deputies are called to his retreat to receive instructions and to discuss. I have merely been ordered to carry out the deputy's routine labors until he returns. However, I will be obeyed in any matter. I can, and will, do anything that will make you more comfortable or will amuse you, from a change in your accommodations to providing you with companions. You observe," he added with exquisite bitterness, "that the limit of my capacity to prove my friendship is to offer my services as a pander."

Bell gazed at the tip of his cigarette, letting his eyes wander about the room for an instant, and permitting them to rest for the fraction of a second upon the round shouldered, writing form by the side wall.

"I am sufficiently amused," he said mildly. "I asked to be sent to The Master. He intends to make me an offer, I understand. Or he did. He may have changed his mind. But I am curious. Your father told me a certain thing that seemed to indicate he did not enjoy the service of The Master. Your tone is quite loyal, but unhappy. Why do you serve him? Aside, of course, from the fact of having been poisoned by his deputy."

INTERNALLY, Bell was damning Jamison feverishly. If he was to play up to Ortiz, why didn't Jamison give him some sign of how he was to do it? Some tip. . . .

"Herr Wiedkind," said Ortiz wearily, "perhaps you can explain."

The round shouldered figure swung about and bowed profoundly to Bell.

"Der Senor Ortiz," he said gutturally, and in a sepulchral profundity, "he does not understand himself. I haff nefer said it before. But he serfs Der Master because he despairs, andt he will cease to serf Der Master when he hopes. And I—I serf Der Master because I hope, andt I will cease to serf him when I despair."

Ortiz looked curiously and almost suspiciously at the Germanic figure which regarded him soberly through thick spectacles.

"It is not customary, Herr Wiedkind," he said slowly, "to speak of ceasing to serve The Master."

"Idt is not customary to speak of many necessary things," said the round shouldered figure dryly. "Of our religions, for example. Of der women we lofe. Of our gonsciences. Of various necessary biological functions. But in der presence of der young man who is der enemy of Der Master we can speak freely, you and I who serf him. We know that maybe der deputies serf because they enjoy it. But der subjects? Dey serf because dey fear. Andt fear is intolerable. A man who is afraid is in an unstable gondition. Sooner or later he is going to stop fearing because he gets used to it—when Der Master will haff no more hold on him—or else he is going to stop fearing because he will kill himself."

TO an outsider the spectacle of the three men in their talk would have been very odd indeed. Two men who served The Master, and one who had been his only annoying opponent, talking of the service of The Master quite amicably and without marked disagreement.

Ortiz stirred and drummed nervously on the desk. The round shouldered figure put the tips of its fingers together.

"How did you know," demanded Ortiz suddenly, "that I serve because I despair?"

Bell watched keenly. He began to see where the talk was trending, and waited alertly for the moment for him

to speak. This was a battlefield, this too luxurious room in which young Ortiz seemed an alien. Rhetoric was the weapon which now would serve the best.

"Let us talk frankly," said the placid German voice. "You andt I, Senor Ortiz, haff worked together. You are not a defil like most of the deputies, and I do not regret hafing been sent here to help you. And I am not a scoundrel like most of those who help the deputies, so you haff liked me a little. Let us talk frankly. I was trapped. I am a capable segretary. I speak seferal languages. I haff no particular ambitions or any loyalties. I am useful. So I was trapped. But you, Senor Ortiz, you are different."

Ortiz suddenly smiled bitterly.

"It is a saying in Brazil, if I recall the words, *'A cauda do demonio e de rendas.'* 'The devil's tail is made of lace.' That is the story."

Bell said quietly:

"No."

Ortiz stared at him. He was very pale. And suddenly he laughed without any amusement whatever.

"True," said Ortiz. He smiled in the same bitterness. "I had forgotten. I am a slave, and the Herr Wiedkind is a slave, and you, Senor Bell, are the enemy of our master. But I had forgotten that we are gentlemen. In the service of The Master one does forget that there are gentlemen."

HE laughed again and lighted a cigarette with hands that shook a little.

"I loved a girl," he said in a cynical amusement. "It is peculiar that one should love any woman, *señores*—or do you, Señor Bell, find it natural? I loved this girl. It pleased my father. She was of a family fully equal to my own; their wealth, their position, their traditions were quite equal, and it was a most suitable match. Most remarkable of all, I loved her as one commonly loves only when no such considerations exist. It is amusing to me now, to think how deeply, and how truly, and how terribly I loved her. . . ."

Young Ortiz's pallor deepened as he smiled at them. His eyes, so dark as to be almost black, looked at them from a smiling mask of whiteness.

"There was no flaw anywhere. A romance of the most romantic, my father very happy, her family most satisfied and pleased, and I—I walked upon air. And then my father suddenly departed for the United States, quite without warning. He left a memorandum for me, saying that it was a matter of government, a secret matter. He would explain upon his return. I did not worry. I haunted the house of my fiancée. The habits of her family are of the most liberal. I saw her daily, almost hourly, and my infatuation grew. And suddenly I grew irritable and saw red spots before my eyes. . . .

"Her father took me to task about my nervousness. He led me kindly to a man of high position, who poured out for me a little potion. . . And within an hour all my terrible unease had vanished. And then they told me of The Master, of the poison I had been given in the house of my fiancée herself. They informed me that if I served The Master I would be provided with the antidote which would keep me sane. I raged. . . . And then the father of my fiancée told me that he and all his family served The Master. That the girl I loved, herself, owed him allegiance. And while I would possibly have defied them and death itself, the thought of that girl not daring to wed me because of the poison in her veins. . . . I saw, then, that she was in terror. I imagined the two of us comforting each other beneath the shadow of the most horrible of fates. . . ."

ORTIZ was silent for what seemed to be a long time, smiling mirthlessly at nothing. When his lips parted, it was to laugh, a horribly discordant laughter.

"I agreed," he said in ghastly amuse-

ment. "For the sake of my loved one, I agreed to serve The Master that I might comfort her. And plans for our wedding, which had been often and inexplicably delayed, were set in train at once. And the deputy of The Master entertained me often. I plied him with drink, striving to learn all that I could, hoping against hope that there would be some way of befooling him and securing the antidote without the poison. . . . And at last, when very drunken, he laughed at me for my intention of marriage. He advised me tipsily to serve The Master zealously and receive promotion in his service. Then, he told me amusedly, I would not care for marriage. My fiancée would be at my disposal without such formalities. In fact —while I stood rigid with horror—he sent a command for her to attend him immediately. He commanded me to go to an apartment in his dwelling. And soon—within minutes, it seemed—the girl I loved came there to me. . . .

Bell did not move. This was no moment to interrupt. Ortiz's fixed and cynical smile wavered and vanished. His voice was harsh.

"She was at my disposal, as an act of drunken friendship by the deputy of The Master. She confessed to me, weeping, that she had been at the disposal of the deputy himself. Of any other person he cared to divert or amuse. . . . Oh! *Dios!*"

Ortiz stopped short and said, in forced calmness:

"That also was the night that my father died."

SILENCE fell. Bell sat very still. The Teutonic figure spoke quietly after the clock had ticked for what seemed an interminable period.

"You didt know, then, that your father's death was arranged?"

Ortiz turned stiffly to look at him.

"Here," said the placid voice, quaintly sympathetic. "Look at these."

A hand extended a thick envelope. Ortiz took it, staring with wide, distended eyes. The round shouldered figure stood up and seemed to shake itself. The stoop of its shoulders straightened out. One of the seemingly pudgy hands reached up and removed the thick spectacles. A bushy gray eyebrow peeled off. A straggly beard was removed. The other eyebrow. . . . Jamison nodded briefly to Bell, and turned to watch Ortiz.

And Ortiz was reading the contents of the envelope. His hands began to shake violently. He rested them on the desk-top so that he could continue to read. When he looked up his eyes were flaming.

"The real Herr Wiedkind," said Jamison dryly, "came up from Punta Arenas with special instructions from The Master. You have talents, Señor Ortiz, which The Master wished to use. Also you have considerable wealth and the prestige of an honorable family. But you were afflicted with ideas of honor and decency, which are disadvantageous in deputies of The Master. The real Herr Wiedkind had remarkable gifts in eradicating those ideas."

JAMISON sat down and crossed his knees carefuly.

"I looked you up because I knew The Master had killed your father," he added mildly, "and I thought you'd either be hunting The Master or he'd be hunting you. My name's Jamison. I killed the real Wiedkind and took his identification papers. He was a singularly unpleasant beast. His idea of pleasure made him seem a fatherly sort of person, very much like my make-up. He was constantly petting children, and appeared very benign. I am very, very glad that I killed him."

Ortiz tore at his collar, suddenly. He seemed to be choking.

"This—this says. . . . It is The Master's handwriting! I know it! And it says—"

"It says," Jamison observed calmly, "that since your father killed the previous deputy in an attempt to save you from The Master's poison, that you are

to be prepared for the work your father had been assigned. Herr Wiedkind is given special orders about your—ah—moral education. In passing, I might say that your father was sent to the United States because it was known he'd killed the previous deputy. He told Bell he'd done that killing. And he was allowed to grow horribly nervous on his return. He was permitted to see the red spots, because he was officially—even as far as you were concerned—to commit suicide.

"It was intended that his nervousness was to be noticed. And a plane tried to deliver a message to him. Your father thought the parcel contained the antidote to the poison that was driving him mad. Actually, it was very conventional prussic acid. Your father would have drunk it and dropped dead, a suicide, after a conspicuous period of nervousness and worry."

BELL felt his cigarette burning his fingers. He had sat rigid until the thing burned short. He crushed out the coal, looking at Ortiz.

And Ortiz seemed to gasp for breath. But with an almost superhuman effort he calmed himself outwardly.

"I—think," he said with some difficulty, "that I should thank you. I do. But I do not think that you told me all of this without some motive. I abandon the service of The Master. But what is it that you wish me to do? You know, of course, that I can order both of you killed. ."

Bell put down the stub of his cigarette very carefully.

"The only thing you can do," he said quietly, "is to die."

"True," said Ortiz with a ghastly smile. "But I would like my death to perform some service. The Master has no enemies save you two, and those of us who die on becoming his enemies. I would like, in dying, to do him some harm."

"I will promise," said Jamison grimly, "to see that The Master dies himself if you will have Bell and myself put in a plane with fuel to Punta Arenas and a reasonable supply of weapons. I include the Señorita Canalejas as a matter of course."

ORTIZ looked from one to the other. And suddenly he smiled once more. It was queer, that smile. It was not quite mirthless.

"You were right, just now," he observed calmly, "when as the Herr Wiedkind you said that I would quit the service of The Master when I ceased to despair. I begin to have hopes. You two men have done the impossible. You have fought The Master, you have learned many of his secrets, and you have corrupted a man to treason when treason means suicide. Perhaps, Senores, you will continue to achieve the impossible, and assassinate The Master."

He stood up, and though deathly pale continued to smile.

"I suggest, Senor, that you resume your complexion. And you, Señor Bell, you will be returned to your confinement. I will make the necessarily elaborate arrangements for my death."

Bell rose. He liked this young man. He said quietly:

"You said just now you wouldn't ask me to shake hands. May I ask you? . . ." He added almost apologetically as Ortiz's fingers closed upon his: "You see, when your father died I thought that I would be very glad if I felt that I would die as well. But I think"—he smiled wryly—"I think I'll have two examples to think of when my times comes."

IN the morning a bulky, round shouldered figure entered the room in which Bell was confined.

"You will follow me," said a harsh voice.

Bell shrugged. He was marched down long passageways and many steps. He came out into the courtyard, where the glistening black car with the blank windows waited. At an imperious gesture, he got in and sat down with

every appearance of composure, as of a man resignedly submitting to force he cannot resist. The thick spectacles of the Herr Wiedkind regarded him with a gogglelike effect. There was a long pause. Then the sound of footsteps. Paula appeared, deathly pale. She was ushered into the vehicle—and only Bell's swift gesture of a finger to his lips checked her cry of relief.

Voices outside. The guttural Spanish of the Herr Wiedkind. Other, emotionless voices replying. The Herr Wiedkind climbed heavily into the car and sat down, producing a huge revolver which bore steadily upon Bell. The door closed, and he made a swift gesture of caution.

"Idt may be," said the Germanic voice harshly, "that you and the young ladty haff much to say to each other. But idt can wait. And I warn you, *mein Herr*, that at the first movement I shall fire."

Bell relaxed. There was the purring of the motor. The car moved off. Obviously there was some microphonic attachment inside the tonneau which carried every word within the locked vehicle to the ears of the two men upon the chauffeur's seat. An excellent idea for protection against treachery. Bell smiled, and moved so that his lips were a bare half-inch from Paula's ears.

"Try to weep, loudly," he said in the faintest of whispers. "This man is a friend."

BUT Paula could only stare at the bulky figure sitting opposite until he suddenly removed the spectacles, and smiled dryly, and then reached in his pockets and handed Bell two automatic pistols, and extended a tiny but very wicked weapon to Paula. He motioned to her to conceal it.

Jamison—moving to make the minimum of noise—handed Bell a sheet of stiff cardboard. It passed into Bell's fingers without a rustle. He showed it silently to Paula.

> We were overheard last night by someone. We don't know who or how much he heard. Dictaphone in the room we talked in. Can't find out who it was or what action he's taken. We may be riding into a trap now. Ortiz has disappeared. He may be dead. We can only wait and see.

The car was moving as if in city traffic, a swift dash forward and a sudden stop, and then another swift dash. But the walls within were padded so that no sound came from without save the faint vibration of the motor and now and then the distinct flexing of a spring. Then the car turned a corner. It went more rapidly. It turned another corner. And another. . . .

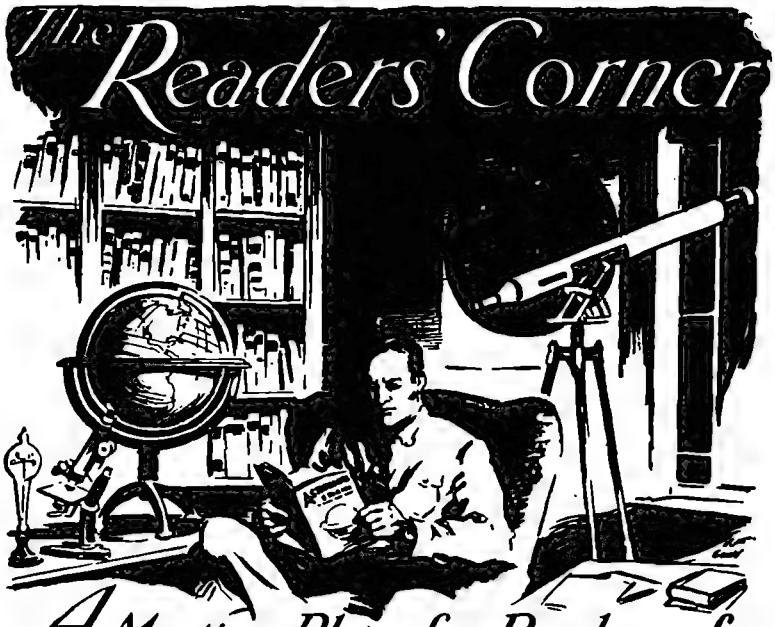
In the light of the bright dome light, Bell saw beads of sweat coming out on Jamison's face. He did not dare to speak, but he formed words with his lips.

"He's turning wrong! This isn't the way to the field!"

Bell's jaws clenched. He took out his two automatics and looked at them carefully. And then, much too short a time from the departure for the flying field to have been reached, the car checked. It went over rough cobble stones, and Bell himself knew well that there had been no cobbled roadway between the flying field and his prison. And then the car went up a sort of ramp, a fairly steep incline which by the feel of the motor was taken in low, and on for a short distance more. Then the car stopped and the motor was cut off.

Keys rattled in the lock outside. The door opened. The blunt barrel of an automatic pistol peered in.

(To be concluded in the next issue.)



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

About Reprints

From time to time the Editors of Astounding Stories receive letters, like the two that follow, in which Readers beg us to run reprints, and now we feel it is time to call attention to the very good reasons why we must refuse.

We admit, right off, that some splendid Science Fiction stories have been published in the past—but are those now being printed in any way inferior to them? Aren't even *better* ones being written to-day?—since a whole civilization now stirs with active interest in science?—since three or five times as many writers are now supplying us with stories to choose from?—since science and scientific theory have reached immeasurably much farther into the Realm of the Unknown Possible?

The answer is an emphatic *Yes*. We all know it.

"A Trip to the Moon"—for instance—was a good story, but shall we keep reprinting it to-day, when recent revolutionary theories of space-time scream to modern authors for Science-Fiction treatment? In the last ten years the whole aspect, the whole future of science has broadened; we have sensed an infinity beyond infinity; and who would be so un-modern as to cling to the oft-told stories of the older science and neglect the thrilling reaches of the new!

The Saturday Evening Post—again, for instance—has been publishing good stories for years, but who would have them reprint the old ones instead of keep giving us good new ones?

Would it be fair to 99% of our Readers to force on them reprint novels they have already read, or had a chance to read, to favor the 1% who have missed them? Of course it wouldn't, and all

of our Readers in that 1% will gladly admit it.

And how about our authors? Contrary to the old-fashioned opinion, authors must eat—and how will they eat, and lead respectable lives, and keep out of jail, if we keep reprinting their *old* stories and turning down their *new* ones? After all, eating is very important; those who wouldn't simply refrain from eating would have to get jobs as messengers, and errand boys, etc.—with the result that much of our fascinating modern Science Fiction would never be written!

It would be much cheaper for us to buy once-used material. It would greatly reduce our task of carefully reading every story that comes to our office, in hopes to finding a fine, new story, or a potentially good author. But it would be very unwise, and very unfair, as you have seen.

Many more reasons could be given, but these few are the more important ones back of our policy of avoiding reprints. Enough said!—*The Editor.*

Wants Reprints

Dear Editor:

In your April issue, in answer to a correspondent, you stated that you were avoiding reprints. Now, that's too bad. Some of the best Science-Fiction tales are reprints. Witness:

"The Blind Spot," by Homer Eon Flint and Austin Hall; "The War in the Air," by H. G. Wells; "The Purple Sapphire," by John Faire; "The Conquest of Mars," by Garrett P. Serviss; "Darkness and Dawn," and "Into the Great Oblivion," and "The After-Glow," and "The Air-Trust"—all by George Allan England.

You are proud—and rightfully so—of your great author, Ray Cummings. Why not give us several stories which helped to build his glory? Here are several:

"Tarranto the Conqueror," "The Man on the Meteor," "The Girl in the Golden Atom," "The Man Who Mastered Time," "The Fire People."

Guess I'll sign off now and give the other fellows a chance.—Isidore Manyon, 544 Myrtle Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

What Think You All?

Dear Editor:

There is one question I would like to ask. Perhaps some of the other readers of Astounding Stories can answer it.

Could a person remember his own death in a former incarnation? Some say "no," and some say "yes." If it is true that you can't, the whole fabric of the wonderful story, one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful I have ever read, "The Moon Maid," by Edgar Rice Burroughs, is built on a fallacy. You see, I am a believer in reincarnation and I would surely like to correspond with others who are also! Would not that also disprove the whole theory of reincarnation if it is true? I think it is not true, but I may be wrong. Is reincarnation a proven theory, or unproven?

You say you are going to avoid reprints. Now that is a mistake. Of course, some you might avoid, such as those of Wells, Verne, etc., though I would like you to publish Wells' short stories. There are many that have not been published in any magazine for a long time, or at all.

But please, oh please, do publish A. Merritt's "Through the Dragon Glass," and give it a cover illustration. It is the only one, I think, that I want particularly, but I do want it! If you publish any of H. G. Wells' works, give them cover illustrations, too.

And publish a lot by Merritt, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and authors like that; you haven't as yet printed a story of the type that A. Merritt writes, and that is one thing this magazine needs, and lots of them, as they are the cream of Science Fiction, and the more of them you have, the better! They are my favorites, and next come those that Edgar Rice Burroughs writes; also John Taine.—Worth K. Bryant, 406 No. Third St., Yakima, Wash.

The S. Lynn Rhorer Society

Dear Editor:

This is to inform you that we have organized a society known as the S. Lynn Rhorer Society of Greater Atlanta, a branch of the Science Correspondence Club.

This Society's purpose is to first assist the Science Correspondence Club and its affiliated branches in the promotion of science and Scientific Fiction. Second, to create a greater interest in science and Science Fiction among the laymen who are already interested, and to create an interest among those who are not at the present interested, and to hold their interest.

At the present time we have in our library over three hundred scientific books; a large collection of ores and rocks from different states and countries, classified; a large collection of fossilized bones; a three-inch refracting telescope, and a ten-inch one in the course of construction; and a large club-house.

Any information regarding this society can be obtained by addressing R. A. Marks, Jr., 893 York Ave., S. W., Atlanta, Georgia, or the undersigned.—F. B. Eason, 400 Jefferson Avenue, E. Point, Ga.

Unused to the Smaller Size

Dear Editor:

I have but one comment on your magazine and that is: Having complete sets of other

Science Fiction magazines I would also like to save Astounding Stories, but in its present size and condition it looks like trash. Why not have a ballot to what size the magazine shall be? By having the price raised to 25 cents it can cover the extra expense. I would surely like to add another magazine to my collection. Am hereby hoping you will do this for the sake of Science Fiction lovers all over the country.—Sidney Mack, 1676 59th Street, Brooklyn, New York.

"The Scienceers" Broadcasts

Dear Editor:

For the benefit of the readers of Astounding Stories who live in New York, a club known as The Scienceers has recently been formed. Its purpose is to promote informal fellowship among Science Fiction fans and to foster discussion of modern developments, theories and projects in the realm of science.

The organization is open to all persons over sixteen years of age who are interested in Science Fiction and its relation to the various fields of present day science. Since regular weekly meetings are held, the membership is necessarily restricted to residents of New York City and vicinity.

A cordial invitation to join The Scienceers is hereby extended to all interested. Further information may be obtained by writing to the undersigned.—Allen Glasser, 981 Forest Avenue, New York, N. Y.

"Congratulations for Both"

Dear Editor:

Congratulations for us both. Your company for publishing this magazine, myself for being able to buy same.

Have just finished reading the second issue. It is very good. I read every story in both issues. You bet I am going to be a steady reader from now on. I like this type of story very much—in fact, read two other magazines that publish stories of this type every month. I note with great pleasure that in the March issue you are starting to publish the first quarter of an interplanetary story by Ray Cummings. This is, indeed, good news. I have had the pleasure of reading five of his novels this past year and I greatly enjoyed all of them. Along with Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Cummings is an "ace high" author on these "unpredictable-future" stories.

Some four or five years ago I read in a magazine a portion of two interplanetary stories by Ray Cummings. Now to the point, I wonder if it is possible for you to obtain Mr. Cummings' permission to have your company publish these two stories? Their names I believe are "Tarranto the Conqueror" and "Into the Fourth Dimension." I, for one, would greatly appreciate this favor. Please do your best to try and publish these novels this coming year. Thanks.—Wm. L. Ebelan, 3906 Springdale Avenue, Baltimore, Md.

Likes the Small Size

Dear Editor:

I received a pleasant surprise when I first bought your wonderful magazine. I started in with the second issue, but I wish I could get the first.

All the stories are good. The best of them, I think, is Ray Cummings' story, "Brigands of the Moon." I have read the first three parts and am eagerly waiting for the last.

And now for something about the make-up of the magazine. I like the small size, and holding the magazine together with two staples is good.

The cover designs are very good, but the pictures inside could be improved on. H. Wesso is a good artist.

How about publishing the magazine twice a month?—Charles Barrett, 135 Spring St., Woodbury, N. J.

Thanks, Anyhow!

Dear Editor:

I hope that you are not going to have a blue cover every month. I would like to see a different colored background every month. The cover on the March issue should have been black because space is black.

I wish that you would have a full-page picture for each story. Wesso is the best artist you have. The others haven't enough imagination.

I gave "Brigands of the Moon" by Ray Cummings first place in the March issue of Astounding Stories. It promises to be his best story since "Tarranto the Conqueror."

The places of other stories are as follows: 2. "Vandals of the Stars"; 3. "The Soul Master"; 4. "Cold Light"; 5. "From the Ocean's Depths."

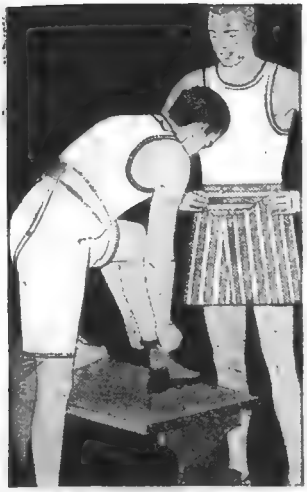
If you would enlarge Astounding Stories to 11¾ by 8½ it would be seen more easily on the newsstands and its circulation would increase. Please publish it on the first of the month instead of the first Thursday.—Jack Darrow, 4225 N. Spaulding Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

"The Readers' Corner"

All Readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time the Editor may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *Readers*, and we want you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*



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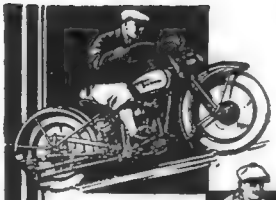

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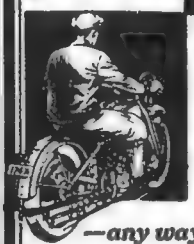

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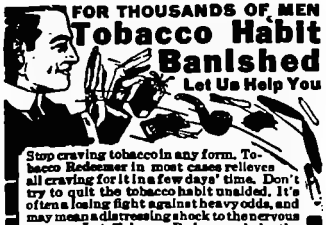

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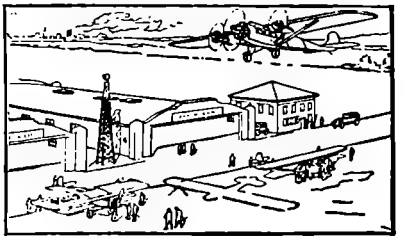

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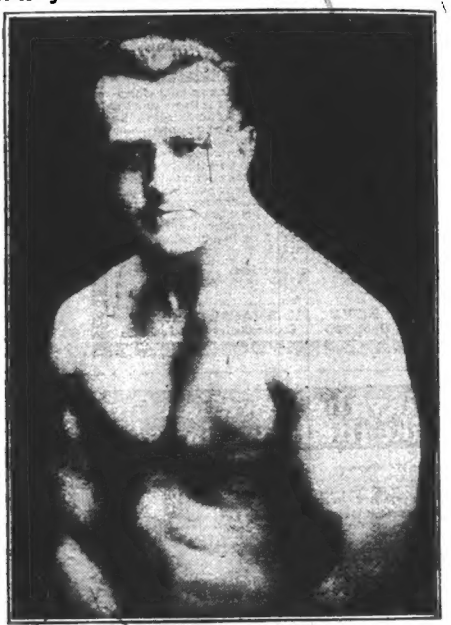

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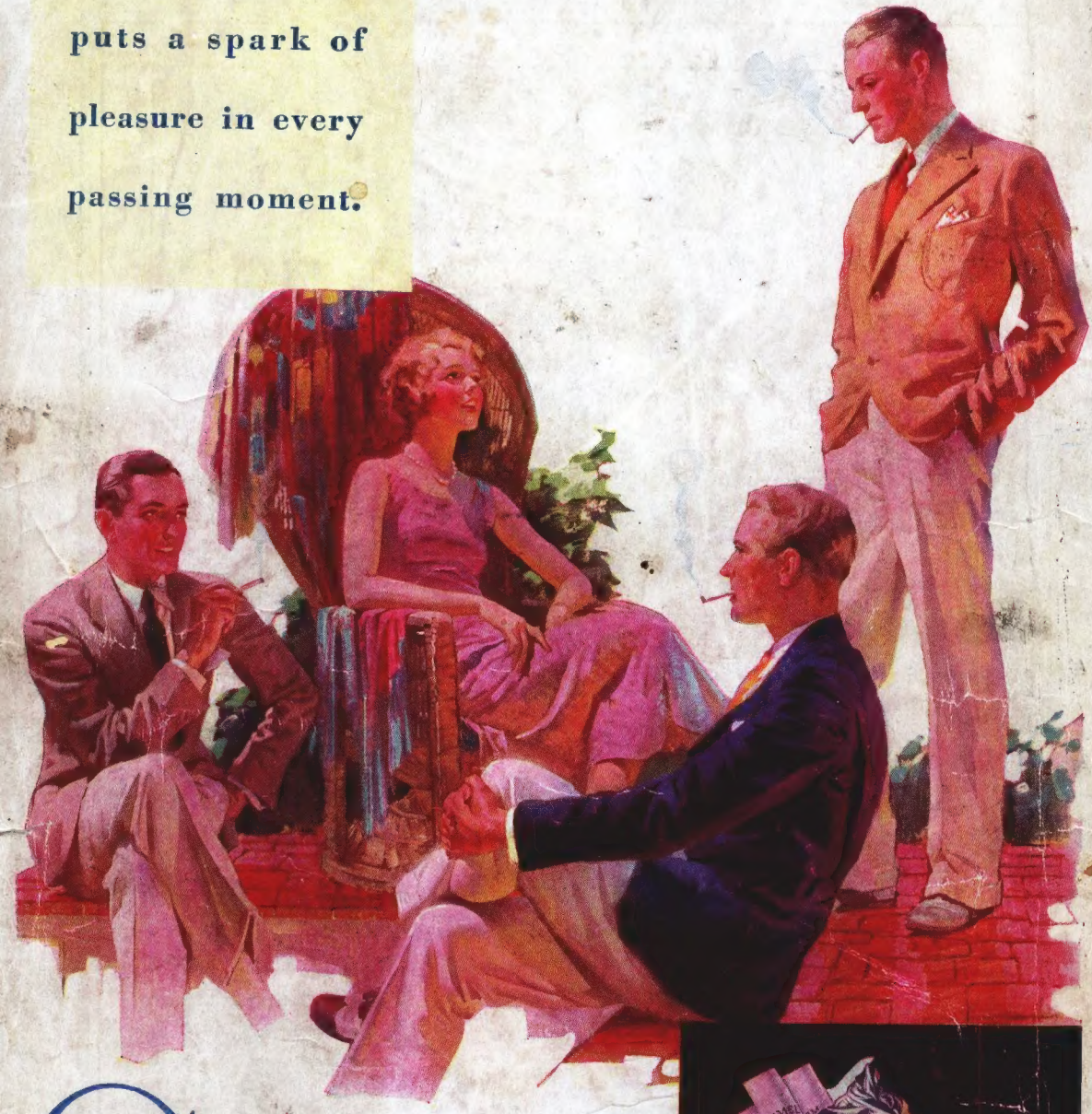

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